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Chapter 5

**THE ROLE OF BRIDGING SOCIAL NETWORKS IN
REFUGEE SETTLEMENT: THE CASE OF EXILE
COMMUNITIES FROM THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA IN
ITALY AND THE NETHERLANDS¹**

Maja Korac

ABSTRACT

The chapter examines how different refugee settlement policies in Italy and the Netherlands affect the process of formation of social networks within and outside a group of compatriots. I explore the social condition of exile communities from the former Yugoslavia and examine how different policy interventions, intentionally and unintentionally, affect micro-level social interactions in these specific settlement contexts. Data for this study were collected during several months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rome (1999-2000) and Amsterdam (2000-2001). The discussion aims to emphasise the connection between specific policy contexts, structural constraints they embody, and the type of human agency they engender. Special emphasis is placed on the examination of the role of 'bridging social networks' established outside the refugee group, which seem to facilitate considerably the successful integration of refugees. I suggest that although governments cannot directly affect the formation of bridging social capital, it is possible to develop policies that facilitate it. Without such policies, integration remains plagued by relative social isolation, even when there are employment opportunities and relaxed naturalisation policies.

Keywords: settlement, social networks, integration policies, refugee experiences, social capital.

¹ This chapter is based upon some findings of my research entitled 'Dilemmas of Integration: Two policy contexts and refugee strategies for integration', carried out at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, between 1999 and 2001. The research was funded by the Lisa Gilad Initiative, the European Commission through the European Council for Refugees and Exiles, as well as The British Council, The Heyter Travel Fund, and The Oppenheimer Fund. The Lisa Gilad Initiative is a charitable trust, set up in 1998, to commemorate the life and work of the late Lisa Gilad, an anthropologist and a founding member of Canada Immigration and Refugee Board.

INTRODUCTION

Refugee settlement has become a much-debated issue in the past decades. Problems of integration are both conceptual and practical, as the term has been defined differently and policies aiming at facilitating settlement developed in a variety of ways (Castles *et al.*, 2003; Robinson, 1998). Although the reception and integration policies of European states vary widely, from the highly centralised state-sponsored programmes, to the provision of minimal and decentralised assistance, a prevailing concern within the EU has been how to facilitate the decision-making process on asylum claims and how to meet the immediate and pressing needs of refugees. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to establish specialised reception centres for the newly arrived (European Commission, 2001). The effects of policy approaches for the settlement of those who are granted asylum are seldom posed, despite a growing realisation among the researchers and practitioners working with refugees that such policies may effectively facilitate their social isolation and stigmatisation.

While it is understandable and important that the policy focuses on the initial phase of refugee settlement, this approach fails to address some other, equally important aspects of long-term integration. It neither acknowledges the fact that the initial and later phases of settlement are interrelated and that the needs of refugees are complex and long-term (Duke *et al.*, 1999), nor the need to build initial conditions for the establishment of bridging social networks in receiving societies (Korac, 2003a). If any policy concerns have been centred on creating conditions for the development of social ties and connections of refugees in receiving societies, such policy initiatives put emphasis on the development of ‘ethnic’ ties within communities.

The emphasis on the establishment of refugee community organisations (RCOs), and therefore on the development of connections and social networks among compatriots, is linked to two main developments within the European context. First, a lack of sufficient service provision for asylum seekers and refugees in many EU states is increasingly transforming community organisations into alternative service providers (Joly, 1996; Bloch, 2002). Second, in many European states, refugee and migrants’ associations are regarded as important for maintaining links with the native culture as well as for ‘voicing’ the needs and interests of specific groups within the multicultural milieu of receiving societies (Eastmond, 1998). The former process and the establishment of ‘ethnic networks’ in receiving societies are considered as essential at the early stages of settlement. They provide refugees with emotional support, and a sense of roots and continuity (Gold, 1992; Joly, 1996; Eastmond, 1998; Bloch 2002).

While it is believed that refugee associations are also important for establishing links with the mainstream society and for overcoming social isolation, the establishment of formal (refugee associations), and informal (‘ethnic’ networks) connections among compatriots does not necessarily increase co-operation within the receiving society. Volunteering at their local community organisation or spending time at their house of worship or any other type of involvement with their ethnic community may be beneficial for refugees and their community, but spending time with ‘people like ourselves’, as Dekker and Uslaner (2001, p. 7) remark, cannot spread social trust. They emphasise that the development of trust ‘come when we put our faith in people who are different from ourselves’ (*ibid.*).

Social capital theory and its emphasis on the value of social networks is a useful framework for addressing problems of refugee integration. Social capital, as Dekker and Uslaner (2001, p. 3) noted, is about the value of social networks through which we bond with similar people and build bridges between diverse groups and individuals. Putnam (2000) introduced the concept of ‘bridging social capital’ to emphasise its potential to generate broader identities and reciprocity as opposed to ‘bonding social capital’ which ‘bolsters our narrower selves’ (pp. 22-23). He pointed out that ‘bonding and bridging are not “either-or” categories’ (ibid., p. 23). Rather, ‘many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others’ (Putnam 2000, p. 23). Consequently, an approach to integration that puts emphasis on the formation of bridging social capital does not imply abandonment of ‘ethnic’ roots and native cultures.

Bridging social networks facilitate the access of refugees to the types and quality of societal resources that are otherwise not readily available to them. These networks should be regarded as complex formations that ‘channel, filter, and interpret information, articulate meanings, allocate resources, and control behaviour’ (Fernández Kelly, 1995, p.219). Opportunities to integrate thus depend ‘not only on the availability of material and intangible assets in the society at large but also on the way in which interpersonal contacts shape information and relate to structures of opportunity’ (ibid.).

Building connections between the refugees and the established community is an essential pre-requisite for the formation of social capital in multicultural societies, as these connections increase trust and reduce racism and xenophobia.² In addressing the problems of trust and the related boundary formation in receiving societies, it is important to explore how micro-level social interactions between people in specific settlement settings and policy contexts occur, and to examine their character. It is also vital to investigate how such interactions affect the process of change and adaptation of refugees.

BRIDGING SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE PROCESS OF REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

The recognition that settlement of refugees is shaped and constrained by governmental policies and cultural norms of the receiving societies informed this comparative study (cf. McSpadden, 1999, p. 244). The Netherlands and Italy have been chosen for comparison because they represent two contrasting policy models of admission, reception and integration of refugees. The Dutch system is state controlled and embedded in a ‘welfare model’ of assisting refugees, while the Italian model is chaotic, lacking an overarching strategy and is embedded in an *ad hoc* approach to refugee assistance. The refugee populations I studied in the two countries come from the former Yugoslavia and are of a similar background; their social upbringing is embedded in the shared socio-economic system of their country of origin, educational system, system of values, and some elements of shared traditions and culture. It was envisaged that the policy and country contexts of the receiving societies affect how this ‘accumulated set of conditions of life’ (Bourdieu, 1984) position the refugee towards others.

² The term ‘host’ community is not used in the text, as ‘it suggests welcome that is not always present’ (for more on this issue of terminology see Van Hear, 1998, p. 55).

Refugees usually bring with them considerable human capital, such as education and skills, and most of them are also of working age. However, they lack social capital, or networks, not only within their own ethnic group but more importantly in the wider society, which limits their ability to make use of their human capital. It is through these ties and networks, 'ethnic' as well as 'mainstream', that refugees experience their new social environment; understand it and adjust their attitudes and behaviour.

It is often argued that the establishment of 'bridging social networks' outside the group of compatriots emerges at later stages of refugee settlement, in the work-place and area of residence or in associations and clubs frequented by members of the established community. The establishment of these 'mainstream' social networks, it is emphasised, depends on the aim and objectives of migration (Robinson, 1986; Bloch, 2002). If refugees consider their stay as temporary, they may be less prone to engage in creating bridging social networks, and hence unwilling to undergo the process of adjustment necessary for their full participation in the receiving society. Consequently, they will be less willing to reshape their identity (Weiner, 1996, p. 52-53).

Willingness of immigrants to integrate, as Weiner (1996) points out, is indeed an important determinant of integration, as are the willingness and ability of the receiving society to absorb them, through the labour market participation and naturalisation. The question remains, however, what is the connection between this structural and institutional integration and the character of micro-level social interactions between people in specific settlement settings and policy contexts? If refugees are employed, naturalised and willing to engage in the process of adjustment, can they be considered integrated? More importantly, do they consider themselves socially included and no longer isolated? What makes them feel that they are full participants and that they belong?

The central question concerning the willingness of newcomers to integrate, according to Weiner (1996), is what are the incentives for them 'to adopt behavioural patterns that make them more *acceptable to the host population?*' (p. 54; emphasis added). There is no doubt that integration involves reshaping of identities and sometimes also a change in patterns of an individual's behaviour to make such behaviour more congruent with the culture of the receiving society. However, the discussion in this chapter calls for a shift in attention away from the notion of integration as a 'top-down' process, based on the assumption that refugees have to change in order to 'fit in' and become 'acceptable' to the receiving society. This approach implies hierarchy and opposition of cultures and considers refugees as having 'immature social identities' who therefore have to be re-educated in order to be integrated (Knudsen, 1991). Knudsen (1991, p. 34) argues that this kind of approach tends to remain within the structural framework of a minority situation. Is there a way to overcome this minority situation framework?

Establishing bridging social networks at the micro-level may be part of the answer to this question. I argue that bridging social networks can emerge at a relatively early stage of integration in a policy context that provides refugees with an opportunity and need for fast mobilisation of resources as these networks facilitate functional integration of refugees, ranging from fostering acquisition of language skills, re-training and employment. Furthermore, I suggest that when the process of building bridging social networks emerges early in settlement, these ties provide the basis for the development of mutual trust. Experience of refugees embedded in such social contacts and ties becomes central to their openness toward the receiving society, its culture and customs. When such interpersonal,

informal communication exists, refugees are less likely to feel threatened and in need for 'entrenching a symbolic boundary' (Bauböck, 1996) between themselves and the established community — and vice versa.

In addition, the existence of bridging social ties and networks can, in specific circumstances, compensate for the dissatisfaction of refugees with some aspects of their settlement, such as underemployment and consequently the lack of a desired social status. I argue that although governments cannot directly affect the formation of bridging social capital, it is possible to develop policy approaches that create initial conditions for the establishment of micro-level networks between the refugees and the established community. Without such policies integration remains plagued by relative social isolation. Without bridging social networks, social isolation persists even when there are employment opportunities and relaxed naturalisation policies.

The main aim of this chapter is to contribute to a debate about the integration of refugees in receiving societies by examining the role of social networks in the process of settlement. While the economic adjustment of refugees is a critical determinant of settlement, and citizenship is the ultimate symbol of full participation in the receiving society, there are many more, subtle components and mechanisms affecting successful integration of individuals and groups. In this chapter, I focus on some of these less readily visible mechanisms that facilitate the ability of refugees to make sense of the 'rules' underpinning social structures and societal relations in the new society, and thus enable their successful adjustment. The analysis also includes the interpretation or meanings that refugees themselves attach to the networks they belong to or aspire to create. The remainder of this chapter is divided into three parts. First, I outline the methodology. Then I provide an account of the social conditions of refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Amsterdam and Rome, and discuss development of social networks and their effect on their settlement outcomes. The concluding section summarises findings and implications of this research.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on qualitative data collected during several months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rome (1999-2000) and Amsterdam (2000-2001), where there was a considerable concentration of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Integration is a process that can take a lifetime, so it is important to specify the time span to be examined. This study examined the situation of refugees from the post-Yugoslav states who arrived in Italy and the Netherlands between 1991 and 1995. It was considered that after six to ten years in exile these people were able to come to terms with some of their losses, to refine the perception of their situation in Italian/Dutch society, and to formulate their goals. My research focused on individuals rather than groups, because refugees are considered to be agents who are actively involved in reconstructing their lives in exile. It was envisaged that the analysis of individual cases and experience of exile would point to the factors that facilitate or hinder interaction within and outside the group of compatriots and the role of such interaction(s) in the process of settlement as defined by refugees themselves.

Qualitative methods were used in this study for several reasons. Their use is linked to a critical view of a 'top-down' approach to integration adopted in this study and its aim to give refugees a 'voice'. Qualitative interviewing is considered as an important way of learning

from refugees, and crucial in addressing the problem of ‘asymmetry of power and voice’ between the state and the refugees (Indra, 1993). Robinson (1998, p. 122) argued that ‘since integration is individualised, contested and contextual it requires qualitative methodologies which allow the voices of respondents to be heard in an unadulterated form.’ Qualitative methods help to avoid treating refugee subjects as ‘data-gathering’ objects.

This study does not aim to produce ambitious generalisations. Rather, it seeks to offer insights into the complexity of the settlement process based on an in-depth knowledge of a small ‘slice’ of reality. The empirical relevance of this research is enhanced by its comparative nature and its focus on the refugees from a single country of origin in two different cultural and policy contexts.

Contacts with the NGO sector, statutory agencies and community organisations in Italy and the Netherlands assisted in identifying refugees for interviewing. Informal contacts I was able to make with the refugees in Rome and Amsterdam were important in establishing a relationship of trust. The fact that I am originally from the former Yugoslavia and can speak their language and to some extent share their cultural background as well as their experience of life ‘outside homeland’ facilitated this.

During the fieldwork in Rome and Amsterdam, I established around 180 informal contacts with refugees from the former Yugoslavia (around 120 and 60 informal contacts respectively). These contacts were useful for collecting general information about their situation in Italy and the Netherlands. As these interactions were usually not on one-to-one basis and, therefore, not suitable for collecting more personal data, I chose 40 refugees in Rome and 20 in Amsterdam for formal, in-depth interviewing. In addition, I tried, as much as possible, to share day-to-day lives with refugees in both study-sites and made every effort to participate in their social life. When the circumstances permitted, I visited them at work, at home, and took part at many social gatherings involving my respondents and their friends, who were either also refugees or people they met in exile. This enabled me to gain a more in-depth understanding of their social situation.

The principal concern in selecting interviewees for this study was to ensure they come from different networks in order to cover a variety of refugee situations. I sought to interview refugees of different age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, parental status, education, region and place of residence before flight. The profile of my sample reflects the characteristics of the refugee population from the former Yugoslavia in the two cities. Tables 1 and 2 show the social characteristics and legal status of the refugees interviewed.

As shown in the tables, refugees in Amsterdam were older and of moderately lower educational level than those in Rome. Most importantly, however, practically all refugees in Rome were employed except for a few young adults still living with their parents. Furthermore, refugees in Rome were overwhelmingly single or cohabiting, without children, and without family networks in Italy. In Amsterdam, parents or siblings of the overwhelming majority of those who were single were also refugees in the Netherlands. While intermarriage or cohabitation with native population was present in the group in Rome it did not exist among my interviewees in Amsterdam. Finally, the overwhelming majority of interviewees in Amsterdam had Dutch citizenship, while the majority of those interviewed in Rome still had temporary, humanitarian refugee status.

Table 1. Social Characteristics and Legal Status of the Interviewees in Amsterdam

| Characteristics | Number | Percentage |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Age | | |
| 20 to 30 | 6 | 30 |
| 31 to 40 | 6 | 30 |
| 41 to 50 | 4 | 20 |
| over 50 | 4 | 20 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 9 | 45 |
| Male | 11 | 55 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 6 | 30 |
| Married | 11 | 55 |
| To Dutch | | 0 |
| To their compatriots | 11 | |
| Cohabiting | | 0 |
| Divorced | 3 | 15 |
| From Dutch | 0 | |
| From their compatriots | 3 | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Parental status | | |
| Single with children | 0 | 0 |
| Married with children | 11 | 55.0 |
| Cohabiting with children | 0 | 0 |
| Divorced with children | 3 | 15.0 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>14 out of 20</i> | <i>or 70 out of 100</i> |
| Educational level acquired in the home country | | |
| Elementary level | 0 | 0 |
| High or Secondary level | 7 | 35 |
| University degree | 7 | 35 |
| Interrupted by war | 6 | 30 |
| Education continued or vocational | 6 | |
| training taken | | |
| Did not continue | 0 | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Time of arrival | | |
| 1991 | 1 | 5 |
| 1992 | 3 | 15 |
| 1993 | 7 | 35 |
| 1994 | 3 | 15 |
| 1995 | 3 | 15 |
| 1996 | 0 | 0 |
| 1997 | 3 | 15 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |

Table 1. Social Characteristics and Legal Status of the Interviewees in Amsterdam (Continued)

| Characteristics | Number | Percentage |
|---|---------------|-------------------|
| Legal status | | |
| Convention ('A') status | 0 | 0 |
| Humanitarian ('C') status | 2 | 10 |
| Provisional permit to stay ('F' status) | 1 | 5 |
| Dutch citizenship | 17 | 85 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Current labour market status | | |
| Employed | 8 | 40 |
| Casual contracts | 2 | 10 |
| Study | 5 | 25 |
| Unemployed | 5 | 25 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>100</i> |

Table 2. Social Characteristics and Legal Status of the Interviewees in Rome

| Characteristics | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Age | | |
| 20 to 30 | 15 | 37.5 |
| 31 to 40 | 17 | 42.5 |
| 41 to 50 | 7 | 17.5 |
| over 50 | 1 | 2.5 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 21 | 52.5 |
| Male | 19 | 47.5 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 19 | 47.5 |
| Married | 10 | 25.0 |
| To Italians | 4 | |
| To their compatriots | 6 | |
| Cohabiting | 10 | 25.0 |
| With Italians | 2 | |
| With their compatriots | 8 | |
| Divorced | 1 | 2.5 |
| From Italians | 0 | |
| From their compatriots | 1 | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |

**Table 2. Social Characteristics and Legal Status
of the Interviewees in Rome (Continued)**

| Characteristics | Number | Percentage |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Parental status | | |
| Single with children | 0 | 0 |
| Married with children | 6 | 15.0 |
| Cohabiting with children | 0 | 0 |
| Divorced with children | 1 | 2.5 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>7 out of 40 or</i> | <i>17.5 out of 100</i> |
| Educational level acquired in the home country | | |
| Elementary level | 0 | 0 |
| High or Secondary level | 7 | 17.5 |
| University degree | 16 | 40.0 |
| Interrupted by war | 17 | 42.5 |
| Education continued or vocational | 13 | |
| training taken | | |
| Did not continue | 4 | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Time of arrival | | |
| 1991 | 9 | 22.5 |
| 1992 | 17 | 42.5 |
| 1993 | 12 | 30.0 |
| 1994 | 0 | 0 |
| 1995 | 2 | 5.0 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |
| Legal status | | |
| Humanitarian status | 22 | 55.0 |
| Work permit | 13 | 32.5 |
| Italian citizenship or permit to stay for family | 5 | 12.5 |
| reasons | | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |
| Current labour market status | | |
| Employed | 28 | 70 |
| Work and study | 7 | 17.5 |
| Only study | 5 | 12.5 |
| Unemployed | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>100</i> |

REFUGEE ACCOUNTS ON RECONSTRUCTING LIVES IN THE NETHERLANDS AND ITALY

Following the 'Integration' Rules in the Netherlands

The Dutch model of refugee integration is based on a number of measures and interventions by the state intended to meet the immediate needs of refugees and to facilitate

their gradual structural and institutional integration in Dutch society. The main goal of the Dutch integration policy is to 'activate citizenship' by enhancing the opportunity of individual migrants to exercise responsibility involved in membership/citizenship in Dutch society (Lechner, 2000). The emphasis on responsibility leads to a contractual relationship between refugee/immigrant and the government/municipality, as the basis of the policy. The rights and obligations of both parties are guaranteed. The government/municipality is obliged to provide an integration programme, including language and re-training courses; the newcomer is obliged to complete the programme successfully within a specified period. If the newcomer fails to meet requirements stipulated in the contract/policy, the government might reduce his/her social security benefits or penalise those who receive income from other sources.

The Dutch integration policy is embedded in the country's well-developed welfare system and provides a considerable level of social services for refugees. The system is therefore favourable for those fleeing with children and the elderly. However, to protect the welfare system from abuse, the government introduced restrictive admission and reception policies, which have affected the process of integration of refugees. At the time of my research (2000-2001), those seeking asylum in the country usually experienced a two-stage admission and reception procedure involving a stay of up to 48 hours in an investigation centre (OC), and a several months long stay in an asylum centre (AZC). For some, in cases when a provisional permit to stay ('F' status) was granted, the reception procedure involved a third stage. This stage usually lasted up to three years and involved provision of housing and a modest allowance, but no provision directed at integration into Dutch society, such as compulsory language training, the right to re-train and work. This phased, state-led settlement process may therefore last for years. A relatively relaxed naturalisation policy at the time, meant, however, that most of those who were allowed to stay in the country could obtain Dutch citizenship relatively shortly after this period.

Although the national government devises integration policy, the local municipalities and the NGO sector implement it 'on the ground'. The Dutch NGO sector, whose work with refugees goes back to the 1970s, is well-developed and funded, although traditionally it relies heavily on volunteers. The 1990s, however, were characterised by a tendency to increase the involvement of professionals in work with refugees.³ Due to the organisational and financial capacity of these organisations, as well as the responsibilities that individual immigrants have toward the Dutch state to 'integrate', my respondents were in continuous contact with a variety of service providers who were leading them through the 'integration' process. Consequently, they did not have to engage in any kind of intensive networking within or outside their ethnic group in order to settle in the city.

The contacts with service providers started during the refugees' stay in reception centres (from several months to over a year). Although most people appreciated the fact that they were 'not left to their own devices', as a 51-year-old Bosnian man put it, the contacts with service providers were overwhelmingly perceived as lacking the knowledge about their individual needs and situations as well as about their culture(s) and backgrounds. Consequently, refugees complained about being taught how to use the lavatory while at the reception centres, as a 35-year-old Bosnian doctor recalled. A 48-year-old Bosnian nurse remembered being shown 'how to use the fridge and how to switch on the television', when

³ The information cited was provided by representatives of the NGO sector in the Netherlands during my exploratory visits in September 1999 and September 2000.

they moved to their own accommodation in Amsterdam. Such experiences were perceived as humiliating and unrelated to their needs. They were clearly embedded in the structural framework of a minority situation and a concept of cultural differences, in which the culture of the receiving society is ranked as superior (Knudsen 1991, p. 30-34). More importantly, these service providers were the key mediators and guides to Dutch society. Based on these contacts and experiences, and without closer, informal communication with other Dutch residents, many of the refugees gradually formed a perception of a profound cultural distance between Dutch society and their societies of origin. Consequently, their main micro-level social communication was limited and based on networks developed along ethnic lines or focused on family ties.⁴

The group of 20 refugees interviewed in Amsterdam was comprised of a large number of younger individuals (between 20 and 40 years of age) as well as a considerable number of older people (over 41 years of age) (See Table 1). Over half of the group were from urban areas, married with children. Approximately half of the interviewed were from semi-urban settlements. Interviewees in Amsterdam were well-educated, with approximately one third having a university degree, and an equally high number with a technical or other vocational qualification on a secondary level.⁵ The group consisted almost exclusively of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, who were overwhelmingly Bosniaks or of ethnically mixed families.⁶

The people I met during my fieldwork in Amsterdam all appeared to be relatively 'well-settled'. As shown in Table 1, almost all were Dutch citizens, around half of them were employed, and another quarter was studying or in the process of getting their formal skills recognised. The level of labour market participation of the group was similar to the general level of employment of refugees in the Netherlands. In 2000, the unemployment rate among Dutch population of working age was three percent, whilst the unemployment rate among refugees was 35 per cent.⁷ Both those employed and unemployed enjoyed relatively good living conditions and had short and longer-term plans for their future. None had plans to return to Bosnia-Herzegovina, though some of those older and unemployed did not entirely give up the dream of going 'back home'. Although a tiny minority articulated their need to return 'for good' as soon as their children are 'up on their feet and independent', as a 51-year-old Bosnian man did, the majority saw their future in the Netherlands. Younger respondents who were studying or working did not think about returning. A majority of them shared the 'migration plans' and the attitude of a 42-year old woman, who explained:

Since I arrived here [in 1993], I suppressed any thoughts about going back. I think that I've changed a lot, as well as the people I knew in Bosnia. It's a big gap between us now, and there's no way of bridging it. So, I am focused on my life here and I want to stay.

Despite their willingness to reconstruct their lives in Amsterdam, and their relatively good standard of living, enjoyment of fine public amenities and social tolerance, the refugees felt that they were not 'of Amsterdam', to paraphrase Mollenkopf's (2000, p. 127) view on

⁴ For more information and discussion on the character of the co-community ties among the refugees in Amsterdam see my article *Integration and How We Facilitate It: A Comparative Study of the Settlement Experiences of Refugees in Italy and the Netherlands* (Korac, 2003a).

⁵ Vocational high schools (the total of 12 years of schooling, with last four years in vocational education) were widespread in the education system of the former Yugoslavia.

⁶ The constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina uses the term *Bosniak* to refer to Bosnian-Muslim.

⁷ Data provided by *Emplooi*, an organisation assisting refugees in finding employment in the Netherlands.

boundaries between immigrants and the Dutch in the city. The refugees continued to perceive themselves as the 'Other' and generally not accepted by the Dutch. The following is an account of a 35-year-old Bosnian man, in the Netherlands since 1994, on the type of 'otherness' he felt since in exile. This highly educated man who was among very few who were employed in their profession said:

Foreigners are extremely marginalised here, although that is officially denied. Foreigners, except the Americans who work here, are usually portrayed in the media in a very bad way [...] I feel here pretty much the same as I felt in my hometown in Bosnia under the Muslim government during the war. They kept us [non-Muslims] there to show the world that they are a democratic state. It's the same thing here; they keep us here to show the world that some foreigners may be successful and 'well-integrated'.

Although the sense of marginalisation was often articulated as a feeling of 'otherness', the problem was experienced and strongly felt on another, micro-level of communication which was emphasised by all. A 'successfully integrated' Bosnian man explained the roots of his feeling of 'otherness':

I am employed in a Dutch medical firm, I speak Dutch language well, my child goes to a Dutch school and soon he'll speak Dutch better than his mother tongue, but we live here a parallel existence, because we don't have real contact with Dutch society. We are neither accepted nor rejected. The biggest problem is that we don't have any friends among the Dutch here. We are here left to ourselves. I have a flat in Amsterdam, I live here, but I don't have any ties with Dutch people.

The experience of marginalisation did not originate in any form of open racism or discrimination; almost all of the refugees emphasised their appreciation of social tolerance of the Dutch. They did not have any 'bad experiences' in their (limited) informal communication with them, but they felt 'invisible'. The following account of a 27-year-old Bosnian student and an intern in a Dutch firm clarifies this point:

I have a great desire to integrate, to the extent that is possible for someone who isn't Dutch. I want my life to be normal. I want to be accepted by the Dutch, but no matter how much I try, I feel invisible among my colleagues at work, for example. They are perfectly correct work wise, but when it comes to some kind of socialising at work or after working hours, they behave as if I am not there. Then I feel excluded.

During my fieldwork in Amsterdam, I realised that almost all of these 'well-settled' people felt socially isolated because they lacked any closer ties with the Dutch. This problem did not seem self-imposed, as the refugees emphasised the importance of establishing such informal contacts at and beyond working place. The absence of such contacts, I realised, was a 'missing piece' from their feeling of being included in Dutch society. It affected the formation of a boundary between 'us', refugees, and 'them', the Dutch.

In my search for more in-depth insights into the mechanisms leading to such social isolation and the consequent feelings of non-belonging, I explored more closely the process through which the refugees were reconstructing their lives in the Netherlands. Their accounts on the situation and choices they faced during this process pointed to the problems within highly centralised, state-sponsored settlement programmes.

Most refugees I interviewed experienced this phased, state-led settlement as a pressure to 'adjust in the way the Dutch see fit', as a 37-year-old Bosnian man put it. This man who was still in the process of getting his professional skills recognised, perceived his integration experience, as did many of my other respondents, as a form of social control which hardly left any space for the process of mutual adjustment and individual agency. The 'successfully integrated', 35-year-old Bosnian man summarised the views of my respondents:

I do what I am told to do, and everything is going according to 'integration' rules that we 'refugees' have to follow. We didn't have to integrate really, you see, we just had to do what we were told.

Those employed or studying felt particularly exposed to this 'all-embracing pressure to adjust, both at professional and personal level', as one of them put it. Many were in fact underemployed because of the many structural and social barriers in the Dutch labour market and society. It took on average up to seven years for those few who were resourceful, patient and lucky enough to undergo the process of skills recognition, to be back in their professions.

Many of older or less educated people responded to the perceived control and pressures of integration by reducing their life aspirations and by effectively excluding themselves from wider society; they had opted for the unemployment/social benefit strategy of 'integration'. This choice, articulated by many as an 'early retirement', was overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, gender specific. Women in their late 40s or older who could not find employment in their professions, were more likely than men to take jobs that pay the same or slightly better than social benefits. In most cases, their spouses would spend most of their days in their local community organisations, either working as volunteers or socialising.

The difference in attitude between men and women concerning underemployment revealed in my Amsterdam study is linked to the issue of how men and women develop survival strategies in exile (Eastmond, 1993; Friere, 1995; Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999; McSpadden, 1999). Friere's (1995) psychodynamic assessment of exile experiences of Latin Americans in Canada demonstrates that, given comparable time in a new country and similar settlement experiences, gender identity associated with women's traditional roles and responsibilities seems to be linked with the development of successful survival strategies in women. In most societies and cultures, Friere points out, 'work only adds an additional, secondary role to their [women's] core identity as mothers and wives' (1995, p. 21). Men's core identity is by contrast, work-related and supported by a number of traditional socioculturally established roles of 'authoritative figure', 'provider' and 'protector' within the family and community (Friere, 1995; McSpadden, 1999). In exile, as Friere further points out, men become painfully aware that their occupational status, sources of power, and political agendas are non-existent or meaningless in the receiving society. She argues that although both women and men in exile experience psycho-emotional disorganisation and individual identity crisis, women tend to reconstruct their core sense of identity more successfully than men; they are more likely to achieve a sense of a continuity of meaningful vital roles in exile than men (Friere, 1995). Consequently, I would add, women tend to be more open to whatever opportunities arise in exile.

Dutch policies of integration render refugees 'passive recipients of aid' (Harrell-Bond, 1986): refugees are seen as policy objects, rather than agents in the settlement process. Consequently, many refugees in the Netherlands remain unemployed and dependent on social

funds because they are not motivated to enter the labour market to earn an income that hardly exceeds the social benefit they are entitled to. Many are not able to practice their professions, not because their skills are not needed in the Dutch labour market, but because of the many structural and social barriers that prevent them to do so.

The Dutch 'top-down' approach to integration and the consequent feelings of detachment from the society seems to have increased the refugees' fear of the officialdom and the state, despite being naturalised in the Netherlands. A few respondents who were Dutch citizens expressed a degree of uneasiness or fear of a possibility of their citizenship being revoked if the political situation in the Netherlands was to change and somehow turn all non-native Dutch into undesired aliens. Wallman's (1979) argument that a social boundary has two kinds of meaning — structural or organisational, and subjective — helps explain this seemingly paradoxical situation. Wallman suggests that "[b]ecause a social boundary is about the organisation of society no more and no less than it is about the organisation of experience, neither element has more or less reality than the other. Both the difference and the *sense* of difference count" (Wallman, 1979, p. 7). Among my respondents, the social distance from the Dutch was translated into doubts concerning equality of citizenship rights between the two groups. In the context of the Dutch 'integration model', citizenship was perceived as yet another way of state control rather than a guarantee of equality and full participation.

Surviving the 'Chaos' in Italy

Italy lacks legislative framework that could be a basis for social policy pertaining to reception and integration of refugees. This situation is caused by two factors. First, Italy was until relatively recently a country of emigration and a transit country, through which refugees and other migrants only passed on their way to other European and overseas destinations. Although the situation changed in the 1990s, the experience of the previous decades still shapes the institutional memory of many governmental bodies, which still find it difficult to acknowledge that many of the refugees and other migrants actually come to stay. Second, Italy's welfare system is relatively underdeveloped, which has led to a corresponding approach to assistance available to those seeking and/or granted protection. The assistance is minimal and it is assumed that those in need will resort to self-help within refugee and migrant networks, and that this will encourage them to become self-sufficient in a short period.

The absence of both a national integration strategy and a corresponding welfare structure have contributed to the situation in which both government organisations and the NGO sector in Italy continually deal with emergencies. The Italian NGO sector, with a mandate to assist asylum seekers and refugees, is also a relatively recent phenomenon. Most of the organisations were founded at the beginning of the 1990s. They are unevenly spread across the country and less numerous than church organisations, which offer assistance to the destitute in general, including refugees. Church organisations and NGOs provide various types of assistance, ranging from emergency accommodation and free meals to language courses. However, the assistance they are able to offer cannot meet the needs of a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees.

The group of 40 refugees interviewed in Rome consisted overwhelmingly of relatively young (between 20 and 40 years of age, see Table 2), urban, and well-educated people,

predominantly single or cohabiting, without children, overwhelmingly from Bosnia-Herzegovina, most of whom were either Bosniaks or of ethnically mixed families. Even after seven or more years in Rome, single people, but sometimes also couples, often lived in shared accommodation with other refugees from the former Yugoslavia, immigrants from other countries or Italians who were also newcomers in the city. Only those married to Italians had Italian citizenship, very few had time-limited work-permits to stay, and the rest (a majority) had a temporary permit to stay, issued for humanitarian reasons and renewable on a yearly basis, which included the right to work and study. This temporary status was usually granted without any lengthy determination procedure. It was based on a special government decree introduced in 1992 to regulate the status of refugees from the former Yugoslavia who were fleeing generalised violence and persecution and therefore could have not been judicially recognised in Italy, because its legislation refers solely to the Geneva Convention.

Although they were granted the right to stay without any special difficulties or delays, only a couple of respondents in my Rome study received some form of minimal assistance to settle. Consequently, refugees in Rome encountered profound problems in achieving financial security and their first years of settlement were characterised by a struggle for physical survival, ranging from finding shelter to learning the language and finding any kind of work.⁸ Their settlement involved a degree of self-selection, because younger people and those without children were more likely to find ways into the 'system' and society, and of surviving in the city without any assistance. Others moved on to smaller towns in the north of Italy, where it was easier to find accommodation and work, or they tried to resettle to a third country. In a few families that stayed on, teenage children often had to work during their first year in Rome to contribute to inadequate family budgets.

For those who stayed in Rome, the experiences of hardship in finding shelter, learning the language, finding work and becoming independent without assistance were interwoven with feelings of self-respect for being active in finding a solution and for being self-sufficient. Immediately upon their arrival, they engaged in an intensive process of networking among the group(s) of compatriots, and formed a spontaneous self-reception system. Although the Italian 'system' rests upon the assumption that refugees and other immigrants will be assisted through self-help groups they form, the policy framework in the country does not specifically encourage the formation of immigrant and refugee organisations. Unlike in some other EU countries, where the state institutions create opportunities for the recognition of groups (Joly, 1996), in Italy, the formation of associations is not the main avenue to obtain support from the state. In such a context, intra-group ties and networks are primarily informal and formed spontaneously to facilitate the needs of individual members. The spontaneous networking among my respondents involved contacts across ethnic lines, as this type of contacts and communication was critical for their physical survival in Rome.⁹ A 33-year-old single woman from Bosnia, in Italy since 1992, explained the character of these networks:

Each of us had our own opinions about politics [...] We'd have disputes over that [...] But despite the political discussions, we'd help each other whenever we could, regardless of where

⁸ For information and discussion on the kind of difficulties these refugees encountered in Rome and the survival strategies they developed, see my article *The Lack of Integration Policy and Experiences of Settlement: A Case Study of Refugees in Rome* (Korac, 2003b)

⁹ For more on these networks in Rome see Korac (2003b).

we were from and what our political views were. That attitude was essential, because we needed these contacts and each other's help.

I argue that the situation in Rome and the character of the policies pertaining to the reception of refugees in Italy had an unintended effect on (re)creating inter-ethnic links among the refugees, the links that were destroyed by war and conflict in the former Yugoslavia. These networks were characterised by 'weak' ties among their members, as they were not based on family, kinship or ethnic ties (Granovetter, 1974). Rather, their networks were geared toward fast mobilisation of resources, ranging from finding vital information to securing accommodation and jobs.

Most of the refugees in Rome, regardless of their education and skills, had low-paying jobs primarily in the service sector; they usually worked long and antisocial hours. They also often worked in the informal economy, despite their legal right to work. This was not because of any specific discriminatory practices toward refugees/foreigners, but because that is also the situation for many Italians. A 33-year-old woman from Croatia explained the situation in an IT firm where she works: 'everyone in the firm works like that [informally]; our boss decided not to have many legal [formally employed] workers.' Many were combining work and studying, because the war and subsequent flight had interrupted their education. They were experiencing many difficulties, which are briefly summarised in the account of a 25-year-old Bosnian man, in Rome since 1993:

Since I started my studies here [in the autumn of 1997], I've learned a lot. By now I should have almost graduated but with my job that's impossible. I only managed to pass five exams to date, with high grades though, because I lack the time and concentration for studying. When you work until three in the morning [at a bar], you wake up at 10-11, you need time to pull yourself together, to sit and study, make lunch. So I have very little time for studying.

Many more had to abandon the idea of continuing their education because of their unfavourable circumstances in exile. Consequently, and unlike in my Amsterdam study, almost none felt that they had succeeded in settling in Italy so as to give them a sense of security in planning their future. Almost all of them wanted to stay in Rome and Italy, but did not feel that they were in position to make any long-term plans. Their experience of exile in Rome made them realise that the 'only thing that's important' to them is 'what will happen tomorrow', as a 33-year-old Bosnian woman emphasised. She was in Rome since 1991, and like many of my respondents was highly educated but underemployed, with a job in a bar-discotheque, and with temporary, humanitarian permit to stay in Italy. The absence of almost any plans for the future is understandable given their uncertain legal status and their profound difficulties in securing financial stability.

Although the importance of work in developing successful survival strategies was emphasised by all the refugees in my Rome study, it was not perceived as a straightforward way to achieving financial security or indeed to finding work compatible with their skills and education. They emphasised that the lack of an initial reception system forced them to become self-sufficient at a high cost: they were forced to enter a niche in the labour market from which it is very hard to move up the economic and social ladder. For those very few who were resourceful and lucky enough to succeed in finding better jobs, it took approximately the same number of years as for those in Amsterdam.

This grim picture of settlement in Rome is the outcome of the Italian 'system' of reception and integration. In fact, it seems to mirror the government's intentions of minimising their assistance and fostering the development of spontaneous self-help systems among newcomers. Although the initial stage of settlement in Rome was characterised almost exclusively by the social networks of compatriots, the process of intensive networking between the refugees and Italians/residents of Rome emerged early in settlement. Instrumental to this type of networking were women who were initially almost exclusively employed as live-in maids and nannies. Their contacts with Italian families and networks of their friends were central to facilitating their further 'functional' integration (e.g. language training, skills recognition, etc.). The contacts and networks that women established were also invaluable for refugee men in finding their jobs and accommodation.

These and other spontaneous contacts with Italians they had to establish in various social settings, ranging from their neighbourhoods to the markets and cafés, while in search for vital information or some other kind of help, were not mediated through professional or voluntary service providers. Amin (2002, cited in Mumford and Power, 2003, p. 90) argued that these semi-invisible micro-links of undeclared sociability, such as casual contacts between diverse groups of people in public spaces, help people 'rub along together' and develop a positive web of support. Indeed, many of these social encounters were often characterised by both confrontation and misunderstanding, but because they were spontaneous and personalised, those involved in such social interaction were usually perceived as individuals, rather than representatives of a 'culture' or 'society'. This helped avoid a perception that differences between Italian and non-Italian identity and culture are set in opposition, and enhanced the openness of the refugees toward Italians and vice-versa. They also enabled refugees to distinguish between the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion at the state institutional level and during their day-to-day social contacts with Italians.

The experience of inclusion at the everyday level was central to their general satisfaction with their situation in Italy. They felt 'good and safe', as a 50-year-old Croatian woman put it, because most Italians they knew were 'good and emotional', despite existing xenophobia in Italy, which is an issue that 'politicians keep up their sleeve when they need someone to blame'. These day-to-day informal interactions and bridging social networks with Italians helped the refugees adjust to the new culture and the 'rules' of the new society. Some of these contacts developed into closer ties described as good friendships, regular outings, joint holidays and also marriages. By the time of my research, which was undertaken after the respondents had been in Rome for between 7 and 8 years, over a half of the group had more contacts with Italians than with people from their countries of origin.

The openness of the refugees toward their new environment in Rome did not mean, however, their willingness or need to abandon ties with their own culture, roots and identity. The following account of a well-educated but underemployed 38-year-old man from Serbia, in Italy since 1992, echoes the attitude of many of the refugees in my research:

The only way to become integrated somewhere is to be in contact with local people. That means stepping out of a kind of 'national scheme'. Limiting yourself to what you see as your own identity prevents you from accepting whatever may be outside it. Some, for example, speak perfect Italian, even the *Romanacio* dialect, so there's no way you can recognise us as foreigners, they are well adapted. However, there's still a difference [between the well adapted refugees and Italians], which isn't bad at all. From what I've seen it's not a disadvantage and I'd like to keep that distinctive quality.

Spontaneous and individualised contacts with Italians were perceived as ‘two-way’ encounters and catalysts to the process of change. The sense that ‘many Italians managed to learn something from us, too’, as a 25-year-old Bosnian man put it, was very important to all. The intensity and quality of micro-level contacts with Italians contributed to the feeling of the Roman respondents that they were ‘of Rome’, that they are part of the social fabric of city life. They defined losses involved in their flight and exile as losses of economic welfare or uncertain prospects for their future, not as loss of personal agency or social contacts leading to social isolation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter revealed how different policy approaches to integration in the Netherlands and Italy contribute to the shaping of refugee strategies of adjustment and their settlement outcomes. In both contexts, though in a different way, micro-level social interaction along, across and outside ethnic boundaries, was to a certain extent shaped by the settlement policy or the lack of it, and played a critical role in how refugees adjust and perceive their new social environment. Moreover, bridging social networks or ties with the established community at a micro-level were in both contexts identified by the refugees themselves as an important determinant of integration. My research revealed that the refugees in Amsterdam and Rome experienced different levels of success in achieving this important goal. It is important to add here that the relative success or failure of the refugees to establish bridging social networks cannot be attributed solely to the character of the policy and reception system. Indeed, the compatibility of cultures and lifestyles in the receiving and sending societies play a role in establishing closer social ties between the refugees and the native population. Unlike in my Amsterdam study, refugees in Rome perceived the ‘Italian life-style’ as similar to that in their countries of origin. Some aspects of interpersonal communication, ‘café culture’, some values and traditions among Italians in Rome were found to be familiar if not identical; and were helpful in forming a positive attitude toward the receiving society. However, despite the role that different levels of compatibility of cultures may have, this study strongly suggests that the assessment of integration success, as defined by refugees themselves, goes beyond simple, measurable indicators, such as individual occupational mobility or economic status. It importantly includes the existence, quality and strength of bridging social networks.

In the Dutch context, social contacts outside the group of compatriots were almost entirely reduced to the communication with numerous service providers. Such formal social encounters were overwhelmingly embedded in a minority situation framework and therefore they could not lead to establishing bridging social networks. In conjunction with the experience of a prolonged stay at reception centres, the character of refugees’ contacts with service providers contributed to the perceptions of a cultural distance between the Dutch society and the sending society. This led to the experience of social isolation and feelings of detachment from the Dutch and the society at large.

In the Italian context, the absence of an organised assistance programme, and of experience of reception centres and contacts with professional or voluntary aid workers, meant considerable hardship in settlement. By the same token, the lack of integration policy saved the refugees in Rome from systematic bureaucratic labelling, which usually implies a dependent role and the lack of agency (Zetter, 1991). In their effort to reconstruct their lives,

the refugees had to engage in intensive social networking outside their ethnic groups in order to survive and settle in the new society. As these social contacts were spontaneous and personalised, they shaped the attitudes of refugees toward their new social environment in a positive way. The experience of the bridging social networks also tended to compensate for their dissatisfaction with their socio-economic status.

The discussion in this chapter should by no means be understood as an argument for the absence of any assistance and strategy for integration. Moreover, the core of the argument is not that welfare programmes, such as Dutch, necessarily create lasting reliance on government support and undermine refugees' chances to integrate. Rather, the discussion aimed to emphasise the connection between specific policy contexts, structural constraints they embody, and the type of human agency they engender in the process of structuring and re-structuring social relations in societies undergoing social change due to migration and diversification. Further exploration of these connections, of the specific outcomes and meaning that they have for the actors involved in the process of adjustment and integration could lead to the development of policies that would provide initial conditions for a long-term formation of bridging social capital in the receiving societies.

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