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DOI

[10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Müller-Funk, L. (2020). Fluid identities, diaspora youth activists and the (Post-)Arab Spring: how narratives of belonging can change over time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(6), 1112-1128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300>

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To cite this article: Lea Müller-Funk (2020) Fluid identities, diaspora youth activists and the (Post-)Arab Spring: how narratives of belonging can change over time, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 46:6, 1112-1128, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554300>



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Fluid identities, diaspora youth activists and the (Post-)Arab Spring: how narratives of belonging can change over time

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nexus between political remittances, political activism and narratives of belonging. Drawing on semi-directive interviews with activists of three Egyptian youth groups in Vienna and a discourse analysis of their Facebook activism between 2012 and 2017, it shows that major political events in the place of origin can play a key – albeit ephemeral – role in mobilising descendants of Egyptian migrants abroad. Political discussions and practices in Egypt were reproduced abroad, though to a far less extent. However, personal experiences in Vienna also heavily impregnated ideas about events in Egypt. Interviewees emphasised that the revolution in 2011 led to a renegotiation of their relationship to Egypt and for many, their activism was a way to claim their right to multiple identity constructions. Perceiving Egypt as an integral part of their dual identity, they sought to engage in political debates on integration issues in Austria parallel to raising awareness about political events in Egypt. However, as the government grew more authoritarian after the summer of 2013, identity constructions and political activities started to focus more on the Viennese context again, underlining how closely political activities and narratives of belonging are intertwined.


KEYWORDS

Diaspora politics; youth; Arab uprisings; political remittances; Egyptian migration

1. Introduction

This paper explores the nexus between political remittances, political activism and identity constructions in times of turmoil in migrants' places of origin. Drawing on semi-directive interviews with activists of three Egyptian youth groups in Vienna and a discourse analysis of their Facebook activism between 2012 and 2017, it shows that major political events in places of origin, such as the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt in 2011 and the transition phase until August 2013, can play a key – albeit ephemeral – role in mobilising Egyptian migrants' descendants abroad. Political discussions and practices in Egypt were reproduced abroad – on to a far less extent than in Egypt. However, personal experiences in Vienna also heavily impregnated and remoulded ideas about political events in Egypt.

In this paper, I focus on the practices and narratives of belonging of the main actors of three Egyptian youth groups and their activities in Vienna, *Youth for Egypt in Austria*, the

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Austrian-Egyptian Youth and the *Coptic Youth*. The activities of these youth groups between 2011 and 2013 can be mostly characterised as indirect transnational activities (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001, 581): Members wanted to influence public opinion about political events happening in Egypt and promote the rights of Austrian-Egyptian youth in Austria in parallel. However, they also engaged partially in direct transnational involvement: They participated – in small numbers – in demonstrations in Egypt, invited Egyptian politicians to Vienna, lobbied to vote in favour of certain politicians and also cooperated in some small community projects with NGOs in Cairo which they interpreted as part of their political engagement for a better post-revolutionary Egypt.

Studies of migrant political transnationalism and diaspora politics in the last three decades have regularly observed how individuals and associations of migrants take their cues from political events or actors in the homeland (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001, 2003; Sheffer 2003; Bauböck and Faist 2010; Lyons and Mandaville 2012; Betts and Jones 2016), with a key aspect being the role of decisive critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) or transformative events (Sewell 1996) in migrants' host countries. In this paper, I study diaspora politics through the lens of 'political remittances' (Piper 2009; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Tabar 2014; Lacroix, Levitt, and Vari-Lavoisier 2016; Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020), arguing that it adds analytical rigour to the picture. Political remittances as a theoretical concept highlight the potentially multidirectional flows of principles, vocabulary and practices taking place in transnational social fields, of which diaspora activists are a part (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Faist 2000; Pries 2001). It also helps us to assess the relationship between senders and receivers of remittances and their transmission and remoulding processes.

I make three main arguments in this paper: First, I demonstrate that political remittances from Egypt have influenced the type of activism which these youth groups pursued, shifting mostly from direct involvement in political movements in Egypt to migrant community activism. Second, by analysing which identities were mobilised by members of the three youth groups and carving out how these constructions have changed over time, I show that their identity constructions are fragmented and fluid practices which are closely linked to political remittances from Egypt, individual experiences related to developments in respondents' personal lives and the context of reception – a key feature of transnationalism (Portes 2003, 879). Third, by analysing the Facebook debates of the most active youth group, *Youth for Egypt in Austria*, I present a detailed analysis of how political remittances transferred from migrants' country of origin influenced political ideas of migrants' children in a place of destination and demonstrate how they were remoulded in and adapted to a specific context of destination.

2. Concepts and methodology

The article draws on data from a research project on diaspora politics conducted between 2011 and 2016, in which I studied how the revolution in Egypt in 2011 and its aftermath until 2013 influenced Egyptian migrants' and their descendants' political perceptions and actions regarding their homeland, focusing on mobilisations in two European cities – Vienna and Paris. This article concentrates on a particular subset of actors studied in this project, namely diaspora youth activists who emerged more prominently in Vienna than they did in Paris.

Inspired by existing research (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sheffer 2003; Tarrow 2005; Koinova 2009; Lafleur 2011; Nielsen 2013), I define diaspora politics as a particular form of transnational political activity which crosses one or more borders. It is mostly undertaken by migrants and their descendants and targets the domestic and foreign policy of their home country but can be joined by other actors, such as human rights activists, religious groups (e.g. other Christian groups joining Copts' protests), or similar movements in other countries. Diaspora politics aims to 1) directly influence the political situation in the sending country by linking to political actors, organisations and institutions in this country, or 2) influence the public opinion in the receiving country on political events in the sending country. It can be organised transnationally (organisations spanning different countries using common strategies, such as the same slogans and symbols) or locally where activities are restricted to the receiving country.

I argue here that political remittances, defined as '*the act of transferring political principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants connect with, and the process of their remoulding in a context of migration*' (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020), are an inherent element of diaspora politics. In diaspora politics, political principles, vocabulary and practices can be transmitted in different directions: Remittances mostly flow from the country or region of origin to different places of destination in the diaspora (Lyons and Mandaville 2012). However, they can also flow in the opposite direction through activists, expats, migrants and their descendants transmitting political ideas 'back home' (Abdelrahman 2011). They can equally circulate between different places of destination, as research on Coptic diaspora networks emphasises (Botros 2006). The case study analysed in this paper demonstrates that political remittances can also flow from non-migrants in places of origin to migrants and their descendants in their respective places of residence. The paper hence exemplifies one particular type of political remittance flow developed in the introduction of this special issue.

My methodology combined a policy analysis of emigration and immigration policies including a series of expert interviews with people in ministries and political parties in Cairo; 50 qualitative interviews with transnational activists; and a discourse analysis of discussions taking place in their Facebook groups and pages.

For the selection of these respondents, transnational political networks, defined as 'transnational political practices, their links and organisations engaging in political processes in their country of origin' (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, 15) were identified through research on the internet and social media (particularly Facebook as many of these groups either had no official presence on the internet or were not institutionalised). Additional respondents were found through snowballing. The networks studied varied in orientation, size and organisational structure. Some were openly political, and some had no overt political agenda but nevertheless served as fora for indirect transnational activities. After the mapping, the most apparently influential persons within these networks were interviewed. Interviews were not limited to specific age groups or to first or second-generation interviewees. The only selection criterion was active participation in a transnational political network.

Topics covered in interviews with activists included their migration history, ways of procuring information about political events in Egypt, their political participation, interests in and opinions about (Egyptian) politics, their involvement in community associations and political groups and their transnational links, as well as their sense of

identity. As part of the field work I carried out for this article, I contacted the members of the three youth groups who I had interviewed between 2012 and 2014 again and conducted follow-up interviews in 2017 about how their activism and political interests had evolved in the meantime, reacting to Ryan and D'Angelo's suggestion that methodology in transnational migration requires us to go 'beyond the snapshot' in data collection to capture dynamism through time (Ryan and D'Angelo 2018). I also compared their Facebook activism in the (post-)revolutionary phase (January 2011–August 2013) with the following time period (August 2013–November 2017). For the Facebook analysis, I downloaded the complete content of Facebook pages and groups of networks covering the entire examined time period. I then coded and analysed it along two main dimensions: the organisation of political actions and the argumentations of political positions.

The in-depth analysis for this paper is mainly based on sixteen interviews with second-generation Austrian-Egyptians.¹ These young people form a highly specific group of interviewees – for the first interview, they were pre-selected on the basis of their political interest in their parents' home country and their political activism, which is not representative for migrant communities generally. In fact, existing research shows that it is a minority of migrants who get involved in transnational activities (Portes 2001; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003). The majority of these young people were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s – they were therefore in their early 20s when the 25 January revolution happened in 2011. Most of them were born in Austria or came at a very early age to Vienna with their parents, and are Austrian citizens today. Therefore, strictly speaking, not all respondents correspond to what has been classically defined as 'second-generation' in censuses (Waters 2014). Such an approach follows existing research which included children born abroad of immigrant parents who immigrated in childhood in the 'second generation' (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Kasinitz 2005).

These young people form a very interesting group to study in regard to their narratives of belonging: They self-identify strongly as both Egyptian and Austrian, making references to or incorporating different categories used in Austrian integration discourse, such as 'migration background',² 'recognised religious community'³ and describe different forms of discrimination they have been subjected to – racism, xenophobia, islamophobia –, but also refer to Egyptian diaspora policies, such as attempts by the Egyptian consulate to organise and supervise its emigrant population abroad as well as Coptic institutions abroad.

3. Egyptian migration to Europe: an unusual migration choice

Egypt has slowly changed from an immigration country at the end of the nineteenth century to a country where emigration is an omnipresent social phenomenon today. After Nasser's restrictive emigration policies, the Egyptian state first opened up emigration in the 1960s and then progressively started to organise and manage labour emigration to other, mostly oil-rich, Arab countries. Egyptian migration to European countries has only increased in recent decades, especially since the 1980s. It has however remained small in numbers compared to migration to Arab countries: Today, Egypt is one of the largest emigration countries of the world with an estimated 4.3 million Egyptians (or 4.7 percent) living abroad. In 2013, the vast majority of Egyptian emigrants resided in Arab countries

(86 percent), many in Saudi Arabia (around 1.3 million), while around five percent of Egyptian emigrant stocks lived in Europe (De Bel-Air 2016, 2).⁴

According to Egyptian sources, the most important European destination countries today are the UK (250,000), Italy (190,000), France (160,000) and Greece (80,000) (MFA 2008, 2009; MME 2007). The Egyptian community in Austria (25,000, MFA 2008, 2009) is hence one of the smallest in Europe and can be compared to that of Germany to a certain degree (30,000, MFA 2008, 2009). Also compared to the foreign-born population stemming from Turkey (159,000) and Eastern Europe (387,170, *Statistik Austria* 2014) living in the country, Egyptian migration is of minor numerical importance. However, Egyptians have formed the largest Arab migrant group of the country for many years, which has only changed since the arrival of larger numbers of Iraqi and Syrian refugees since 2015. Like other migrants, Egyptian migrants have historically been concentrated in the capital with 65% of the Egypt-born population living in Vienna in 2012 (*Statistik Austria* 2012).

Egyptian migration to Europe includes three main streams. First, small numbers of Egyptians left the country mainly for political reasons in the 1950s (including Greek and Armenian communities, Egyptian Jews, middle and upper-class Egyptians who were targeted by the nationalisation programmes of Nasser, communists, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood). Second, more numerous and diverse streams between the late 1970 and the early 1990s included Egyptians who mainly left for job opportunities abroad, Copts who emigrated for economic and political reasons, as well as political opponents and intellectuals. In the late 1990s and 2000s, a third stream could be observed, dominated by male, less-qualified migrants heading mostly towards Italy and France without papers due to shrinking opportunities in the Arab destination countries and increasingly restrictive immigration policies in Europe (Müller-Funk 2018, 63–67).

Egyptian migration to Austria includes mainly the first and second of these streams: Up to the 1960s, Egyptian migration to Austria was small in numbers and took the form of educational migration, starting with student missions organised under Muhammad Ali in the nineteenth century (Agstner 1993, 11). During the 1980s and 1990s, Egyptian migration became increasingly shaped by economic reasons but also included Copts who migrated for economic and political reasons. At this time, Egyptian migrants established networks between Egypt and Austria characterised by close family ties and social relations which existed prior to departure from Egypt which facilitated – mostly male – work migration with newspaper selling becoming a classical part of the migrant network (Aberer et al. 2006, 99). Figures of the Egyptian-born population with Egyptian citizenship living in Austria increased from 75 in 1934 to 554 in 1961. From the 1980s onwards, the number of Egyptian migrants to Austria started to increase slowly from 1,574 in 1981 to 4,509 in 1991 (*Statistik Austria*, censuses 1934, 1961, 1971–2011). In 2011, for the first time, a figure for Egyptian-born people regardless of their citizenship was recorded amounting to 12,715, which gives a slightly clearer insight into Egyptian migration to Austria. Egyptian statistics on the other hand count 25,000 Egyptian with a ‘migration background’ in Austria (*Medien-Serviceestelle Neue ÖsterreicherInnen* 2013). My respondents are hence representative for Egyptian migration to Austria with their parents having arrived in Austria mainly in the 1980s and 1990s.

4. Diaspora youth politics in times of political turmoil

In Vienna, mobilisations between 2011 and 2013 were small-scale and mainly emanated from associations that already existed prior to 2011 and sought to represent ‘the Egyptian community’ or were established as a counter-reaction against these associations, which were considered to be an extended arm of the Egyptian embassy. These associations were mostly defined by national origin or religious affiliation and had no open political objectives as such, serving rather as secondary fora for mobilising support for a certain political position.

While a ‘revolutionary youth’ linked to 6 April or other revolutionary groups in Cairo did not emerge as a distinct actor in Vienna as it did in other European cities, associations representing the ‘Austrian-Egyptian youth’ did. Mainly three youth groups became active during the (post-)revolutionary phase in Vienna, the *Youth for Egypt in Austria*, the *Austrian-Egyptian Youth* and the *Coptic Youth*. The term ‘youth’ (*shabab*) was pivotal for the naming of all three groups. To a certain extent, this can be interpreted as the reflection of the idea that youth played a crucial role for political change in Egypt, perceiving them as the fuel of the January 25th Revolution and as the vanguard of the future.⁵ This idea was mirrored in the self-description of one of the youth groups: ‘*By the will of the youth, a new and free Egypt will be built up*’ (self-description SMAM, Facebook).

The three youth associations can all be interpreted as classical migrant youth organisations with a weak transnational element (cf. also Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007). The *Austrian-Egyptian Youth* remained a local network which did not cooperate with other associations in Egypt or European countries and did not have links to political actors in Egypt. This means that, strictly speaking, the association was transnational insofar as it tried to raise political awareness about political issues in another country. Youth for Egypt in Austria tried to establish contact with NGOs in Egypt, mainly through personal connections, such as *Risāla*, an Egyptian charity association whose Cairene and Alexandrian projects SMAM visited. *Risāla*’s main aim was to take care of orphans and the poor through financial and food donations, providing better access to health care and raising awareness of recycling and other environmental issues. A second organisation it collaborated with was *Our Strong Egypt’s Association for Egyptians Abroad*: an initiative founded in 2012 by presidential candidate Abou l-Foutouh to build up stronger links among Egyptians abroad and to use their knowledge for Egypt’s development, and bearing a very similar name to his political party *Strong Egypt* (Cf. Ramaḍān, *al-Miṣri al- al-Yawm*, 02/01/2013; Facebook *Mu’assasat Miṣr al-Qawīya li-l-Miṣriyīn fi-l-Hāriḡ*, 16/06/2015). On a European level, SMAM also cooperated with FACE, a Belgian NGO whose mission is to assist and protect orphans, street children and their families, and communities in Egypt regardless of race, culture or religion. The *Coptic Youth* was closely linked to an Egyptian human rights NGO through family links, the *Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organisations* and its chairman, Naguib Gobrail, who has extensive contacts among Copts living in France and the US.

In this case study, the effect of political remittances was arguably felt more strongly in the receiving context than in the sending context. Egyptian youth groups in Vienna did not induce real political change in Egypt. However, political remittances had a direct effect on the politicisation of migrant communities abroad. Ultimately, we can see that political remittances flowing from Egypt influenced the type of activism which the

groups pursued in the receiving context (type 3, Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020): We could describe their activism as moving from direct involvement in political movements in their home country during the (post-)revolutionary phase (2011–2013) to engagement in community associational life in the time period 2013 and 2017. Their activism hence moved from what Van Hear and Cohen have termed ‘imagined community sphere’ to the ‘known community sphere’. Van Hear and Cohen (2017) have distinguished between three spheres of diaspora engagement: the first, the ‘household/ extended family sphere’, being largely personal and private, the second, the ‘known community sphere’ corresponding mostly to the associational realm, and the third sphere, the ‘imagined community’, referring to a community or nation, with which one has an affinity without necessarily knowing its members personally (Van Hear and Cohen 2017, 3–4).

However, the type of diaspora activism which these youth groups pursued was also influenced by the context in which it took place, a key feature of transnationalism (Portes 2003, 879). The founding and functioning of these youth groups happened in reaction to pre-existing associations: On the one hand, the *Youth for Egypt in Austria* and the *Austrian-Egyptian Youth* evolved partly as a strategy against existing first-generation associations which were perceived, firstly, as dominated politically by the Egyptian embassy and, secondly, as dominated by ‘old men’ (interview n°1, 01/02/2012). Among them was the oldest Egyptian association in Vienna, the *Egyptian Club*, founded in 1973, which was mentioned by many interviewees as an important meeting place for Egyptians in Vienna, especially in the years prior to 2011. Similar to the *Egyptian Club*, and probably to an even greater extent, the *General Union of Egyptians*, the second oldest Egyptian association in Vienna, was perceived by interviewees to function as an extended arm of the Egyptian embassy in Vienna. In contrast, the *Coptic Youth* built on already existing Coptic networks linked to the Coptic Church. Coptic interviewees mentioned that they socialised more in Coptic churches and associations linked to them and repeatedly emphasised that they did not feel sufficiently represented in existing Egyptian associations in Vienna. Interviewees highlighted their feelings that they were a minority within these associations, and that Copts had limited access to influential positions within them (interview n°18, Vienna, 04/06/2014).

The *Austrian-Egyptian Youth (AEOEJ)*, for example, was a small association founded in 2009 with the stated purpose of representing ‘young people with an Egyptian background in Austria’ and of helping young people with an Egyptian background to perform better at school and to prevent the danger of ‘losing their traditions.’ While mostly inactive between 2009 and 2010, the association became much more active after the 25 January revolution. The group described itself as contributing to Austrian society while at the same time being conscious of its Egyptian and Muslim roots: ‘We are a major component of Austrian society – living in Austria and having roots in Egypt, we want to contribute our share to the development of society’ (self-description Facebook). Their objectives were thus the conservation of an ‘Arab-Egyptian identity and a Muslim conscience, an intelligent blending of this identity with the Austrian one, the organisation of events, conferences and meetings for both the public and youth with an Egyptian background’ (Facebook, June 2013). Identity and integration discourses thus played an essential role in the self-description of the *Austrian-Egyptian Youth*. With these objectives in mind, the association combined events aimed at strengthening ‘Egyptian-Arab youth in Austria’ with events

raising political awareness about Egypt. The founder of the association appeared repeatedly in the Austrian media, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the revolution.

However, by 2017, the association had ceased to exist. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that members had entered university or the labour market and had less time for civil society activism; on the other hand, taking an open political stance became seen as too risky, as the Egyptian embassy was thought to monitor the group's activities. The group's founder even mentioned open threats by embassy staff in case he returned to Egypt. Finally, a reflection about the usefulness of associations based on ethnicity in order to contribute to inclusive integration processes led the founder to consider other ways of getting active in civil society (interview n°23, Vienna, 02/11/2017).

The second youth group, the *Youth for Egypt in Austria (Shabab min agl Masr, SMAM)*, was founded as a result of the 2011 revolution in Egypt, when a group of young people organised a demonstration in Vienna's main square in support of the ongoing revolution in Egypt. The association describes itself as a '*team of Austrian young people with an Egyptian migration background*' who became aware of their '*feeling of an Arab belonging*' and decided to support their home country so that '*by the will of the youth, a new and free Egypt will be built up*' (self-description Facebook). The association aimed to reach '*Egyptian youth in Austria*' and help them to develop a – political – opinion concerning Egypt.

Despite claiming not to represent or support a particular political programme, the association had clear political objectives in the first two years of its existence: It organised and participated in a series of demonstrations in Vienna to show 'the Egyptian people' its loyalty and to support the overthrow of the old regime. Before the parliamentary elections in 2011/2012, the association mobilised for participation in the elections – in Egyptian coffee houses in Vienna, in front of mosques frequented by Egyptians and Coptic churches. During the presidential elections, the association supported Abou l-Foutouh, perceiving him as the golden 'third way' between liberal and Islamist forces (interview n°15, Vienna, 14/04/2014). SMAM also invited Egyptian presidential candidates to Vienna, such as 'Abdallāh al-Aš'al, Hišām al-Baštawīsī and Mun'im Abou l-Foutouh⁶ as well as invited Hisham El-Gakh, a well-known poet famous for his poetry about the revolution. The group finally also wanted to contribute to Egypt's social development by supporting Egyptian NGOs assisting, for example, homeless people and orphans in Egypt. Finally, engagement in integration debates was an important focus for these young people who incorporated their political opinions about Egypt into these discussions. This association was the most active of the three but faced major internal political divisions starting in 2012. The increasing political polarisation in Egyptian society between a pro-Morsy and anti-Morsy camp – which also divided Egyptian social fields abroad – was equally reflected among members of the group. SMAM had initially supported Abou l-Foutouh in the first round of the presidential elections and then supported Morsy against Ahmad Shafiq in the second round. This increasing polarisation led to the decision to withdraw from taking a political stance in the context of the referendum over the constitution in 2012. The group later broke apart due to personal reasons (interview n°24, 25/10/2017).

While both youth organisations wanted to transcend confessional lines, interviewees mentioned that youth groups continued to be organised along religious lines. Political attitudes played a major role in this bifurcation: In the beginning, some Copts had participated in meetings of SMAM but left when the association started to support

Abou l-Foutouh in the presidential elections. Equally, the experience or non-experience of islamophobia – not lived by Copts – was mentioned as a reason for differentiation among these young people. The Coptic community in Austria became increasingly visible as a political actor after June 2013, when many of them supported the ousting of president Morsy, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Political activities in Vienna were often organised through Coptic associations which were closely linked to the Coptic churches. These associations mainly sought to raise awareness about discrimination and violence against Christians in Egypt, such as the bombings in Alexandria in January 2011 and the Maspero events in October 2011. In 2013, a Coptic youth group emerged as an actor through a series of press conferences wanting to influence political opinion in favour of the ousting of Morsy. It was a loose group of university students and recent graduates who met regularly at Coptic youth meetings in Vienna. These young people were linked through family to the *Coptic-Austrian Organisation of Human Rights*, which was founded in 2008 to make discrimination against Copts in Egypt known to the public. In 2014, the youth group registered as an association called *Association of the Coptic-Orthodox Youth in Austria*. However, after summer 2013, it mostly focused on organising religious Coptic celebrations and cultural events, such as the organisation of a Coptic choir, icon drawing and theatre classes. Raising awareness about the situation of Copts in Egypt remained however an important element for the association (interview n°23, 02/11/2017).

5. Fluid identities: the emergence and vanishing of national pride in revolutionary times

Diaspora youth activists in Vienna were typically male or female students between the ages of 20 and 25 whose parents had migrated to Europe in the 1970s or 1980s and who had often been active in building up first-generation associations representing Egyptian migrants. These young people had lived in Vienna for most of their lives, held Austrian citizenship and mainly knew Egypt through their yearly summer vacations. They were often driven by the motivation to become an active and outspoken part of a more diverse society in Austria, seeing themselves as bridge-builders between Egypt and Austrian society through their efforts to promote information on Egypt and Egyptian culture in Austria.

Their narratives of belonging show that identity constructions are fragmented and fluid practices which are closely linked to activists' political demands. Diaspora youth activists in Vienna, who had been living in Europe for most – or all – of their lives, mobilised strongly hybrid identities. Perceiving Egypt as an integral part of their dual identity, they described their loyalties to Egypt and Austria, emphasising their love for Egypt as an essential part of their identity. For many, their activism was a way to claim their right to multiple identity constructions in parallel to wanting to influence politics in Egypt. They sought to engage in political debates on integration issues in Austria and raise awareness about political events in Egypt at the same time.

Their narratives of belonging were on the one hand influenced by the way they grew up, the social fields in which they (had) socialised, prevalent discourses on integration as well as personal experiences of discrimination they had had living in Vienna: The way they were perceived by the public in the receiving country – framing them as foreigners

even though they had lived there for most of their lives – was repeatedly mentioned as an influential factor for their self-perception. However, they also mentioned experiencing feelings of exclusion and moments of alienation in Egypt, which influenced both: their narratives of belonging and their activism.

In addition, their religious identity played an important role in how they perceived themselves as well as their political attitudes. In this regard, Muslim interviewees mentioned incidences of islamophobia and discrimination regularly and wanted to revisit discussions and debates which were ‘*laden with tension and prejudice*’ (i.e. the compatibility of *sharia* with democracy) and aimed to become the ‘*highest authority to the public for conflictual issues of culture and religion in the foreseeable future*’ (*Austrian-Egyptian Youth*, website). Young Coptic activists described themselves in a similar way, with the exception that they emphasised their Christian-Coptic heritage and culture and incidences of discrimination and violence against Copts in Egypt.

The influence of political events in Egypt on their narratives of belonging and the way they relate to Egypt finally highlights the importance of political remittances for identity constructions as well as the fluidity of narratives of belonging: The 25th revolution had an important effect on respondents’ identity constructions, which was experienced as a trigger for turning more strongly to the Egyptian side of their identity resulting in a higher interest in Egyptian politics and diaspora activism. The immediate period following the uprisings was characterised by a strong national pride in what was happening in Egypt and an omnipresent newly awakened enthusiasm for Egyptian politics. One interviewee had this to say:

Before 2011, I did not even know that politics existed ... So, we knew that here and there, there was a little demonstration. [...] My parents never talked [about politics]. [...] And then we organised the first demonstrations here. We had such a strong sense of home, such a strong connection to the roots. And when you are with a group of people who simply have the same goal ... this strengthened everything. And all these demonstrations. These were beautiful times, these eighteen days (interview n°15, 14/04/2014).

The second round of interviews showcases, however, that in many cases, neither respondents’ political activism nor their perspectives on their identities had remained stable since 2013. Their accounts highlight that their identity constructions are an interaction of political remittances from Egypt, the context in the receiving country and biographical change. Globally, a ubiquitous disillusionment about the political situation in Egypt and the return of an authoritarian regime under as-Sisi was tangible, sometimes triggered through short visits in the country and the compliant state of the Egyptian media landscape. This went along with a stronger focus on the political context in Austria. The founder of the *Austrian-Egyptian Youth*, for example, explained that while his interest in politics had remained high throughout the years, he was now participating in a project about conflict prevention and mediation in Vienna:

At that time, I very strongly identified with the Egyptian side of myself. [...] My ... my feeling of belonging ... or the extent to which I self-identify with Egypt has massively diminished over the last years, yes. So ... before, as an adolescent with 20 years, I was ... still a bit proud to be Egyptian ... This was especially carried by the January Revolution, this was actually the peak of my pride to put it like this ... [...] And then, of course, came the ... crushing blow, yes. [...] The resignation actually started later, when I saw how blinded people are by the new regime in Egypt. [...] This is also related to the fact that I became just a lot ... more

sensitive [...] about anti-Muslim racism ..., homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc. in regard to Austrian politics. In this regard, Austrian politics has become more interesting to me because I now have other 'glasses', also through my studies, but also through personal experiences with which I can assess Austrian politics (interview n°23, 02/11/2017).

Zahra, a former member of SMAM, born in 1991 in Austria, was a student in German and Spanish at the time of our first interview. In 2017, she had finished her studies and was teaching German at a university in the US. Her narrative highlights that her personal testimony of the violent and fatal dissolution of pro-Morsy demonstrations in Cairo in summer 2013, the sexual harassment she experienced when visiting Egypt, and her own migration experiences in Spain and the US changed her perception of Egypt, her political activism and the way she related to the 'Egyptian community':

What I actually noticed is that I actually became ... [...] during the revolution, shortly before the revolution and after, I ... somehow become a patriot, Egypt, Egypt, Egypt, you know, and if anyone said anything bad, I got angry [...]. That calmed down very fast, and in the meanwhile ... I have a certain love-hate for the country, I like to be there, but not too long as before. [...] I think the time of our first interview was actually the beginning of my split from the Egyptian community [...] My worldview has changed; I could not identify with them anymore. Or they could not listen to my stories anymore when I talked too much about [...] my time in Spain because they simply had no relation to my reality at all (interview n°25, 22/10/2017).

Another respondent, Hawa, a former co-organiser of the press conference of the *Coptic Youth*, described a complete loss of political interest. She related this fact to a complete disillusionment about Egyptian politics and to stronger family obligations:

My political interest has totally decreased. [...] And I would no longer call myself a political person. In Austria, too, I do not really know what's going on. [...] I've neglected that very much, now that you ask me. I do not know. Maybe ... because of this hopelessness. [...] Now we have one from the military, exactly like Mubarak. Nothing has changed. I just think that people are not ready and this will not change in the near future (interview n° 26, Vienna, 12/08/2017).

6. Political remittances through social media and a Viennese remoulding

My third argument is that political remittances from migrants' place of origin can influence political ideas in countries of destination, including those of migrants' children. However, these political principles and ideas are adapted to another context and framed through the experiences in the respective place of residence and its political vocabulary. The analysis of the Facebook page *Youth for Egypt in Austria* is revealing of these dynamics.

The Facebook page was created one month after the association was founded in January 2011. It remained active until May 2016. Within three years, it reached 2,370 likes, most of which came from users who were between 18 and 24 years. 75 users participated in discussions. The number of likes increased to 4,262 until 2017, which is quite a high number given the number of people with Egyptian 'migration background' in Austria (25,000).

In regards to language use, most posts were either written in Egyptian dialect or German. Within the first three years of its existence, Arabic was often used for political

content, while posts focusing on historical or cultural information about Egypt were mostly written in German. This could be related to targeting different audiences with the respective language—posts with political content might target the ‘insider group’ and posts containing cultural information might want to inform ‘the outside world’ of Egypt’s cultural heritage. The language use equally showed a gradual shift from Arabic to German, mirroring the increasing refocus of the group on the local context in Austria after 2012 and in particular 2013.

On the one hand, political events in Egypt heavily structured the political activities which the youth group organised until 2012 as well as the political discussions going along with them. To a certain degree, the group reproduced a ‘revolutionary Arabic vocabulary’ which emerged in Egypt in the revolutionary and transition phase (Garduño 2012; Hanafi 2015). This revolutionary vocabulary was characterised by expressions from Modern Standard Arabic which were adopted in an Egyptianised form into the colloquial dialect on the one hand, and by new terms in Egyptian colloquial dialect which acquired a different or more explicit meaning on the other hand. Modern Standard Arabic expressions included for example terms to refer to the political regime, political opponents, political objectives, such as dignity, democracy, or freedom. New terms in Egyptian colloquial dialect included *il-baltagiyya* to refer to ‘the thugs of the regime’, *fulūl* (‘remnants of the old regime’), or *ḥizb il-kanabe*, literally ‘sofa party’, to refer to apolitical, TV-watching people. In June 2012, for example, SMAM organised a demonstration in front of the Egyptian embassy in Vienna demanding the exclusion of the *fulūl niḡām Mubārak* (‘the remnants of Mubarak’s regime’), thus calling for the exclusion of Ahmad Shafiq in the second round of the presidential elections.

On the other hand, political principles and ideas about events in Egypt were remoulded and sometimes framed through the experiences of these young people living in Vienna and the political vocabulary used in the receiving country. For example, after organising a demonstration in January 2012 to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the revolution, a long discussion took place between members of the youth group and a Viennese artist about the role of the *sharia* in the new Egyptian constitution. The discussion is an enlightening example of how discourses on islamophobia in Austria and Egyptian politics were sometimes intertwined. The discussion was as much a discussion about the constitution in Egypt as it was an attempt to find an answer to the oft-debated question in European societies about whether Islam and democracy are compatible in a country where Muslims face islamophobia on a daily basis.

In the discussion, one of the founding members of the association lobbied for the application of the *sharia* in Egypt. Two other female members and another male member joined him in his reasoning. They criticised Western countries for opposing *sharia* and a democratic constitutional state, arguing that a ‘sharia democracy’ was in fact an expanded form of democracy if it was interpreted in the correct way. They said that as most Egyptians were religious and voted for the Muslim Brotherhood, they were in favour of a state influenced by Islamic values. They rejected the idea that the application of the *sharia* put religious minorities or women at a disadvantage pointing out that – unlike Jews and Muslims in Andalusia or Jews in Nazi Germany – Copts had never been expelled or eradicated in Egypt. They criticised the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as hypocritical. Despite its existence, they argued, the headscarf ban in

France, the ban to prevent the construction of minarets in Switzerland, and the 2003 Iraq War had all still been still possible (25/01/2012).

A second key topic was linked to the question of what it means to be a young Austrian-Egyptian living in Vienna. In the first two years after the 25 January revolution, the Arab Spring was repeatedly invoked as a common Arab revolution: '*Congratulations on freedom, Libya! Egyptian revolutionary ... my Tunisian revolution ... my Libyan insistence ... my Yemeni resistance ... my Syrian blood ... my Palestinian dream*' (22/08/2011). The association organised activities to encourage and support 'Egyptian youth' in Austria such as a yearly music festival (Freedom Festival), barbecue events for new members, a sports festival, a 'We Love Egypt Day', as well as cultural lectures on Egypt, free German classes for newly-arrived Egyptians and information stands for high-school graduates on opportunities for attending university in Austria, messages of congratulation for – mostly Muslim – religious holidays such as Ramadan, Ashura and the Islamic New Year, and quotations from the Qur'an.

When the Facebook page stopped posting political content about Egypt after the presidential elections, it started to focus more on the Austrian context. Compared to the pre-2012 phase, there was much less activity on the page with fewer posts, likes and less interaction among users. In May 2016, posts stopped completely. SMAM continued to organise its yearly 'Freedom Festival' with Egyptian musicians until 2016, which also included talks about the situation of street children in Egypt and the problem of the second generation in Austria in 2014.

To a minor degree, SMAM also voiced its opinion about political debates in Austria, especially in regard to Muslims' and refugees' rights in Austria. In 2015, when Austria started to receive high numbers of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees, the group took an openly pro-refugee stance. They called on members to support civil society at Vienna's Western Train Station, which was one of the centres in Vienna that offered assistance to arriving refugees in 2015. SMAM also visited one of the major refugee centres close to Vienna and organised a lunch with 80 refugees in Vienna in June, as well as an *iftar* (fast-breaking) dinner for 100 Syrian refugees in July 2015.

The group also initiated debates and reflections on Austrian politics and controversies, especially when they concerned Austrian Muslims, such as the debates about the reform of the 'Islam Law' in 2014 and 2015.⁷ One other strategy was to distance Islam from extremist Islamist ideologies such as Daesh citing European politicians who did so (18/10/2014) and to engage in interdenominational dialogue such as the *European Muslim Jewish Dialogue* in 2014 and 2015.

7. Conclusion

This article showcases that political remittances from places of origin to places of residence can have a strong influence on political activism and identity constructions: Diaspora youth activists emphasised that the revolution in 2011 led to a renegotiation of their relationship to Egypt. For many, their activism was a way to claim their right to multiple identity constructions. Parallel to raising awareness about political events in Egypt, they also sought to engage in political debates on integration issues in Austria. However, as the Egyptian government grew more authoritarian after the summer of 2013, narratives of belonging and activities started to give more focus to the Austrian context. Therefore,

my research demonstrates that identity constructions of migrants' descendants are fluid practices which respond – among others – to key political events in the countries of origin of their parents – such as the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 as well as the overthrow of Morsy's presidency in the summer of 2013.

The type of political remittance flows analysed in this paper thus correspond mainly to type 3 of the typology developed in the introduction of this special issue: Political discussions in Egypt were reproduced abroad by these three youth groups, albeit to a far less extent, including the usage of a 'revolutionary' Arabic vocabulary, which developed in Egypt during the (post)revolutionary phase.

This paper also shows that diaspora politics does not evolve in a vacuum but in a particular local context: Beyond the specificities of migration flows and the personal networks of individuals, the way in which Viennese Egyptians were organised prior to 2011 influenced the form that political protests took. The case study presented in this paper shows that youth groups either evolved explicitly as a strategy against pre-existing associations or to provide additional support for their political line. In this case study, the density of transnational links to political actors in Egypt was not of major importance for the shift of these groups, as they had only weak direct connections to Egypt and many of their activities could be classified as indirect transnational activities.

I argued in this paper that an approach which looks at diaspora activism through the lens of political remittances helps us to understand that neither the identity constructions of migrants' children nor their activism is a constant. Instead, they are dependent on multiple factors – their social status, transformative events in their parents' home country, the context of reception (Portes 2003, 879), and personal life developments. In this case study, political remittances influenced the type of activism these young people pursued in Vienna and how they constructed their identity. This echoes Anderson's case study of Danish-American lodges in the early twentieth century (2020) to a certain extent: While Danish-American lodges cultivated practices of what it meant and implied to be Danish, they also spread alternative ideas of Danishness which went beyond the image of Danish collaboration with fascism. Similarly, Krawatzek and Sasse's research on German-speaking migrant communities in the US (2020) demonstrates that decisive junctures in migrants' home country, such as World War I, fundamentally called into question the desirability of being German in the US.

Notes

1. Eleven interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2014 and five in 2017 with those respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview. Personal names are fictitious.
2. The Austrian national statistical agency *Statistik Austria* defines people with migration background as those whose parents were both born abroad, subdivided into migrants of the first generation (people born abroad) and those of the second generation (children of migrants born in Austria). The 'migration background' category was first included in the Austrian census in 2008. In 2016, around 22% of the Austrian population or 1,898 million people had a 'migration background'.
3. Austria's model of religious incorporation has its origins in the Edict of Tolerance of 1782 and the 1867 Constitution which gave all officially recognised churches and religious communities particular rights, such as the right to public religious practice, the autonomous management of their 'internal' affairs, the protection of their funds, foundations and institutions, the establishment of private confessional schools, and the provision of religious education in

public schools. A law in 1874 defined how a religious community could be legally recognised – a tradition which has continued until today. By 2017, Austria had officially recognised sixteen religious communities, including the Islamic Religious Community (1912) and the Coptic Orthodox Church (2003).

4. However, figures diverge massively: According to Egyptian sources, estimates for Egyptian emigrant stocks range from 4,6 to 8 million, hence 6 to 14% (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008/2009, Ministry of Manpower and Emigration 2007).
5. ‘Youth’, in Hanafi, Amira. *A Dictionary of the Revolution*, <http://qamosalthawra.com/en#124>, access: 26/01/2018.
6. Moneim Aboul-Foutouh is a moderate Islamist doctor and ex-Muslim Brotherhood leader. He was imprisoned several times under Mubarak as part of a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2011, he formally quit the Muslim Brotherhood, following his decision to run for president in the presidential election in 2012 and was particularly popular among young Egyptians in the elections.
7. Hanafi Sunni Islam has been officially recognised in Austria since 1912 when Bosnia and Herzegovina were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the context of a debate on Islam in Austria which has been increasingly imprinted by a securitisation discourse, a new Islam Law (Islamgesetz) was adopted in 2015 which specified the obligations and rights of the Islamic and Alevi Community. The new law prohibits external funding of religious associations and established the first institute for Islamic Theology in Austria. The prohibition of external funding was heavily debated because it constituted an unequal treatment of religious communities by singling out the Islamic faith as other officially recognised religious communities were not subjected to such restrictions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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