

Migrants as Change Agents: A Study of Social Remittances between Finland and Russia

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Abstract : In this research, the potential for societal change is researched through the idea of migrants as change agents. The viewpoint is on the potential that migrants have for affecting societal change in their country of origin through transmitting transnational peer-to-peer information. The focus is on the information that Russian migrants living in Finland transmit about their experiences and attitudes regarding the Nordic welfare state, its democratic foundation and the social rights embedded in it, to their family and friends in their country of origin. The welfare provision and level of democracy are very different in the two neighbouring countries of Finland and Russia. Finland is a Nordic welfare state with strong democratic institutions and a comprehensive actualizing of civil and social rights. In Russia, the state of democracy has on the other hand been declining, and the social and civil rights of its citizens are constantly undermined. Due to improvements in communications and travel technology, migrants can easily and relatively cheaply stay in contact with their family and friends in their country of origin. This is why it is possible for migrants to act as change agents. By telling about their experiences and attitudes about living in a democratic welfare state, migrants can affect what people in the country or origin know and think about welfare, democracy, and social rights. This phenomenon is approached through the concept of social remittances. Social remittances broadly stand for the ideas, know-how, world views, attitudes, norms of behavior, and social capital that flows through transnational networks from receiving- to sending- country communities and the other way around. The viewpoint is that historically and culturally formed democratic welfare models cannot be copied entirely nor that each country should achieve identical development paths, but rather that migrants themselves choose which aspects they see as important to remit to their acquaintances in their country of origin. This way the potential for social change and the agency of the migrants is accentuated. The empirical research material of this study is based on 30 qualitative interviews with Russian migrants living in Finland. Russians are the largest migrant group in Finland and Finland is a popular migration destination especially for individuals living in North-West Russia including the St. Petersburg region. The interviews are carried out in 2018-2019. The preliminary results indicate that Russian migrants discuss social rights and welfare a lot with their family members and acquaintances living in Russia. In general, the migrants feel that they have had an effect on the way that their friends and family think about Finland, the West, social rights and welfare provision. Democracy, on the other hand, is seen as a more difficult and less discussed topic. The transformative potential that the transmitted information and attitudes could have outside of the immediate circle of acquaintances on larger societal change is seen as ambiguous although not negligible.

Keywords : migrants as change agents, Russian migrants, social remittances, welfare and democracy

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