Transnational migrant politics in the Netherlands: historical structures and current events

Mügge, L.M.

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SUMMARY

Although academic interest in migrant transnationalism has been flourishing over the past decade, systematic comparative empirical research on transnational migrant politics is thin on the ground. Just what shapes the emergence and evolution of such politics remains poorly understood. This is the gap this dissertation addresses. Three lines of inquiry have guided this study: first, it asked how migrants’ political integration in host societies influences political transnationalism and vice versa. Does one necessarily exclude the other, as is often suggested in public discourse? Second, it has tried to delineate the factors shaping the emergence and development of migrant transnational political activities and ties, as well as their intensity and degree of institutionalisation. Third, in light of globalised communication and the emergence of a second generation in host societies, it aimed to trace the evolution of migrant transnational politics over time. Globalisation is often seen as conducive to transnational linkages whereas permanent settlement and the emergence of the second generation are argued to have the opposite effect. What is the net balance between these two forces?

In its search for answers, this project has employed a comparative, historical and transnational approach. It has investigated the transnational involvement-domestic integration nexus by focusing on both the national and the transnational political participation of migrants. To establish explanatory factors, it has compared different sending countries (Turkey and Suriname), migrant groups (Turks and Surinamese) and subgroups within them (for example Kurds and East Indians). The ‘time’ factor – comprising generation and length of stay – is covered through the project’s historical approach.

In its theoretical approach this thesis has attempted to break with the methodological nationalism prevalent in much existing research. Migrants are commonly studied as immigrants, while factors related to the country of settlement are over-emphasised at the expense of those related to the country of origin, in particular once migration has taken place. In addition, this thesis’ approach posits that the exclusive focus on transnational activities in much scholarly work – rather than the transnational ties and the social structures that underlie the ‘visible’ side of transnational politics – is insufficient to understand transnational politics. Instead, it argues for a more encompassing analysis of the emergence, development and decline of the ties that individuals and collective actors maintain.

This dissertation examines transnational politics at different levels of political aggregation to identify the factors that shape such politics over time. It thus gives specific attention to individuals as well as migrant organisations, political parties in both the country of origin and the country of settlement, and state-level actors which shape migrant political opportunity structures. To establish the importance of factors
on the individual level, 101 structured interviews were carried out in the Netherlands in 2004; the results were compared by sending country, ethnicity and generation. In addition, to collect data for political parties, organisations and state policies, I conducted a total of 241 interviews in the Netherlands, Suriname and Turkey. Interviewing was accompanied by participant observation and the collection of documents, pamphlets, party programmes, searches in newspapers, on the internet and so on.

What does the research conducted at different levels of political aggregation and with divergent methods tell us about transnational migrant politics once the pieces of the puzzle are put together? The first main finding is that Turkish and Kurdish transnational ties are more institutionalised on the collective level than Surinamese ones. Transnational ties between Turkish organisations and parties are often based on shared ideology and tend to be resilient. When individual leaders step down, ties between migrant organisations and Turkish political parties remain intact. In contrast, transnational ties between Surinamese organisations in the Netherlands and Surinamese political parties are primarily based on kinship, friendship and ethnicity; in other words, their degree of institutionalisation is much lower. While these ties also tend to persist, they are used for different purposes over time in line with the shifting political interests of individual actors.

The highly institutionalised transnational ties of Turkish migrants can be traced back to the active involvement of the Turkish state. The Turkish state has provided many more political opportunities to its (former) citizens and their descendents to remain active towards their homeland than the Surinamese state and has actively intervened in transnational migrant politics. This difference can be explained by differences in their respective nationalist programmes. Dutch-Surinamese are not included in the Surinamese definition of ‘the nation’ whereas Turkish migrants are. Strong homeland nationalist programmes thus facilitate institutionalised transnational ties. In contrast, the Surinamese government has been reactive at best and acts defensively once migrants return with new ideas.

A second and related finding is that the structure of Surinamese transnational politics is individualist while the structure of Turkish transnational politics is collectivist. This is not only a direct consequence of different types of homeland political opportunity structures and nationalism; it is also a reflection of the organisation of homeland politics – which mirror the patterns found in transnational politics.

The third main finding is that because of their collectivist character, the scope of transnational politics is broader in the Turkish and Kurdish cases than in the Surinamese case. Turks and Kurds mobilise quickly and efficiently and reach broader publics. This is a direct consequence of the quality of Turkish and Kurdish migrant organisational networks.
Fourth, dense migrant organisational networks facilitate both national and transnational political participation and thus political integration. Leaders of central migrant organisations often belong to the transnational and migrant elite. The common conception that there is a clear trade-off between transnational and host country political involvement does not seem to hold.

A fifth finding that equally contradicts widely held perceptions is that a tiny fraction of transnational activities are violent in nature. Even radical groups have only very rarely undertaken violent actions in the Netherlands. Whereas public anxiety over migrants’ transnational political involvement is fuelled by media reports that are unsurprisingly biased in favour of violent activity, the broad-based research underlying this thesis paints a more complete and nuanced picture of transnational politics – which is often no less mundane than ‘regular’ domestic politics.

Sixth, elite transnational actors are rarely rewarded with political positions in the homeland – although transnational activism can augment one’s status within migrant civil society in the Netherlands. Both the Turkish and Surinamese states are sceptical of returnee influence; if returnees do end up achieving high positions, it is often only after many years of proving their loyalty.

The seventh finding is that as migrants realise their residence in the Netherlands is permanent, transnational political involvement on the whole decreases. Transnational ties are now used for different purposes and often directed towards the Netherlands rather than the homeland. Calm homeland political climates and length of stay explain this shift. Kurdish and Turkish transnational ties, however, have persisted over time and over generations because homeland based actors and diaspora leaders have continued to reach out to their brethren abroad. By implication, new communication and transportation technologies have not in themselves boosted transnational politics in either intensity or scope. Neither has such politics been deterrioralised: transnational politics clearly remains bound to nation-states and influenced by the opportunities they do (or do not) provide.

Finally, on a more abstract level, this study shows that the activities of migrants are often a direct response to political changes in the country of origin or settlement. Ties, in contrast, persist even if the activities that led to their establishment have ceased. New activities may be channelled through old ties; in this sense, a shadow of the past remains in contemporary transnational politics. Ties have the broadest scope when they are collective, and are more highly institutionalised when homeland-based actors or diaspora leaders initiate them from above. Such ties are more likely to persist and allow for the formation of new ties by second and third generations.

The insights this study generates go beyond the cases it has examined (and comparable cases); it also makes theoretical and methodological conclusions concerning transnational politics in general and how it can be studied. First, research should focus on both transnational activities and ties – only then can the underlying social and political structures, and hence the evolution of transnational politics over
time, be understood. Second, by evidencing the central role of home-country actors in transnational politics, it shows the need for researchers to be attentive to actors in both the host and home country and their motivations to engage in transnational political activity. Third, the comparison between two countries of origin and three migrant groups underlined that ‘transnational politics’ is not a ‘one size fits all’ concept. Forms and directions of activity differ over time and by group, meaning transnational politics must be studied in its full diversity. This requires not only attention to processes and structures in both the country of residence and the country of origin – and if relevant, in the supranational arena. It also underlines the value of actual fieldwork in the homeland for in-depth insights into ‘transnational politics in action’.