The Role and Impact of Iranian Migrants in Western Europe

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July 2017

VU | VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM

The Simorgh

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In light of increasing migration in Europe, the aim of the current study is to gather a better understanding of the societal position, societal and political participation, and embeddedness of migrants in Western European countries. The Iranian migrant community is used as a case study. The research used an online questionnaire which was distributed in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. 935 participants completed the questionnaire which was advertised through different online media channels. The questionnaire was translated and available in Persian, French, German, English, Swedish and Dutch.

Findings of the study shows that:

• Migration of Iranians to Western Europe was mainly driven by *education* and to a lesser extent *political reasons*.

• Iranian migrants in Western Europe are relatively positive about their position in society vis-à-vis other migrant groups and their income situation. They are most commonly permanently employed or in education.

• Trust in other Iranian migrants is surprisingly lower than trust in native citizens.

• Except for political parties, most institutions in the new country of residence are trusted by Iranian migrants.

• When Iranian migrants in Western Europe are active in politics, this is mostly through online action, and almost never through violent forms of action. Especially people who migrated for political reasons are also politically active in their new country of residence.

• People who migrated for work reasons are socially less involved in the new country of residence.

• There is an interesting pattern between the number of years someone has lived in Western Europe and trust in others and in society. Whereas people who live in Western Europe for shorter than two years or longer than 20 years, experience quite high levels of trust, people who live in a new country between 2-10 years show a lower level of trust in others and in the fairness of society.

This is an initial research into the Iranian migrant community. Further research would be encouraged both in other migrant communities to understand integration, social and political participation factors within Europe and within the migrant communities.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, many Iranian nationals sought and found political refuge in various countries, including many Western European countries. In the decades after that, many other Iranians migrated to Western Europe for various reasons, resulting in a substantial Iranian minority population in Germany (around 153,000 people)[1] , the United Kingdom (86,000)[2] , Sweden (63,000), the Netherlands (37,500) [3], and France (15,000). The biggest migrant and diaspora community of Iranians are in the United States of America (estimated over 1,000,000). Smaller groups of Iranian migrants also settled in Austria (11,500) [4], Switzerland, and Belgium amongst other countries. The aim of the current study is to gain a better understanding of the societal position, societal and political participation, and embeddedness of Iranian migrants in various Western European countries.

Migrating to another country causes many things besides one's geographical location to change. One's social life, position in society, language, occupational status are only a few of the changes one might experience. Migrants often go from being part of a majority group to being part of a minority group in society, possibly facing the negative consequences of this change in position (e.g. Castles & Miller, 2003). Following this change in environment and position, the question arises *how people perceive their position in society and cope with it? Do Iranian migrants assimilate (Berry, 1997) completely to their new country of residence? Do they become active in organizations or engage in political participation in the new country?*

The group of Iranian migrants is an especially interesting group of people to examine the questions posed above. On average, Iranian migrants can be considered highly skilled and well educated (Lewin, 2001) which is different from many other migrant groups in for example the Netherlands who on average have lower education levels than native citizens (e.g. Entzinger, 2014). Research on political participation shows that high levels of education on average are associated with more participation in politics (e.g. Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). In addition to that, political refuge was the main reason for migrating for a large group of Iranians after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, suggesting at least some levels of political awareness and interest in their home country that could be transmitted to their new country of residence. However, many other factors could complicate the relationship between education and interest for migrants. How strongly do Iranian migrants feel attached to the country of residence? How do they perceive their status and treatment vis-à-vis the majority and other minority groups in society?

Various scientific studies have been conducted on various aspects of Iranian migrants, such as their identity (Ghorashi, 2004), health risks (e.g. Berg-Hansen et al., 2014; Gilliver et al., 2014), and use of internet (van den Bos, 2006). Almost

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1 Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund - Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus, retrieved from: http://bit.ly/1QdomTx

2 Population of the United Kingdom by Country of Birth and Nationality Dataset, retrieved from: http://bit.ly/2iewzaR

3 Population by origin and generation, retrieved from http://bit.ly/2v2yHwU

4 Bevölkerung nach Staatsangehörigkeit und Geburtsland, retrieved from: http://bit.ly/1KAeyk1

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without exception, these studies focused on Iranian migrants in one country. One of the main improvements of the current study is that is allows for making comparisons on several dimensions between Western European countries, namely Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

The research was initiated and partially supported by the Simorgh, a non-profit organization based in Austria and concerned with Iranian migrants, especially in Europe. The researchers, Ali Honari and Maarten van Bezouw of the Sociology department at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, were solely responsible for the design of the questionnaire, collection and storage of the data, and the analysis. Pari Namazie worked with the researchers to edit the questionnaire, complete and present the final report.

METHOD

One of the main aims of this study was to compare different countries and to gather a substantially large group of participants, hence online data collection was the most feasible form of data gathering. The data were collected using a Qualtrics Survey Software platform whereby a link was distributed to different online communities in order to reach the largest possible number of participants. The target population consisted of people with an Iranian background, meaning first or second generation Iranian migrants over 18 years old living in Western Europe. Using an online questionnaire naturally impairs the representativeness of the sample, attracting a more homogenous sample than the average Iranian migrant population. Possible overrepresentation in the sample is mainly expected in terms of education (higher), age (lower), and political interest (higher) compared to the average Iranian migrants.

The questionnaire items concerned:
• Social/ Organizational embeddedness
• Social/ Institutional trust
• Identification
• Social identity threat
• Political participation
• System justification and legitimization of the political system
• Social capital
• Cultural integration

Questionnaire distribution

The data were collected between February and April 2016 by relying on online communities of the Iranian diaspora. The link to the questionnaire was distributed through several Facebook groups that were attended by the Iranian Diaspora in the various countries that are part of this study. Other networks and means were used as well, including Twitter and e-mail. In addition, the study was advertised on one of the biggest websites for the Iranian diaspora worldwide: www.kodoom.com. At the end of the questionnaire, we asked each participant to indicate through which channel they had found out about the study and were asked to distribute the link further to other people in their Iranian diaspora network. Indeed, more than 80% of the participants indicated getting the survey through Facebook or Twitter. Another 8% through advertisements on websites and 6% through email.

METHOD

 An online questionnaire, consisting of multiple choice items was designed. The initial English questionnaire developed by the researchers was translated by native speakers into Dutch, French, German, Persian and Swedish. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee Psychology (CEP) of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands.

 All in all, there were 18 different versions of the questionnaire (see Table 1).

 In a series of pilots, participants were asked to indicate if they thought the questions were comprehensible, whether they were clear and did not contain errors in the language, and if they faced any possible technical difficulties with filling in the questionnaire online.

 In the online questionnaire, all participants were shown a first page containing an informed consent form written in English and Persian with an explanation of the goal of the research, information about the confidentiality of the data, estimated duration, contact information of the researchers, and a note on the voluntary nature of participation in the study. If the participants agreed, they were redirected to the next page in which they could indicate their country of residence. For each of the countries, the participants could subsequently indicate in which language(s) they were comfortable filling in the questionnaire.

Country	Language
Austria	Persian/German
Belgium	Persian/Dutch/French
France	Persian/French
Germany	Persian/German
The Netherlands	Persian/Dutch
The United Kingdom	Persian/English
Sweden	Persian/Swedish
Switzerland	Persian/German/French

Table 1: Overview of the translations of the questionnaire

   Based on previous research (Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, and Shahinper, 2003), we expected an effect of language where participants would express different norms and attitudes when the questions were asked in Persian as opposed to (one of) the native language(s) in the country. To control for this, all participants who indicated they were comfortable with filling in the questionnaire in both Persian and the native language of the country they resided in, were randomly assigned to either one of those languages.

   Based on these initial questions, the participants were redirected immediately to the remainder of the questionnaire for the country they lived in and using the language that they preferred or were randomly assigned to.

METHOD

For some questions regarding the position of the Iranian diaspora in a society vis-à-vis other groups in society and education level for example, the answer categories were adapted to fit each country.

The ordering of the questions was done in a way that the most relevant and interesting questions were asked in the beginning of the questionnaire, avoiding possible bias or fatigue effects from background questions. Moreover, all items that could potentially influence answering on subsequent questions were randomized to counter this possible bias from the question order.

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were thanked for their participation and offered the opportunity to leave their email address if they wanted to receive a brief report of the findings of the study. The contact information of the researchers was repeated here in case the participants had any questions or complaints following the completion of the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of several groups of variables, aimed at measuring embeddedness and position in society, and political and social participation of the Iranian diaspora.

Several background variables were measured as well, such as gender, age, place of birth and the number of years that someone has lived in the country of residence, education, and occupation.

Political participation was a key interest of the study and participants were asked whether, and in what forms of politics they had participated in politics in the country they reside in. Several constructs related to political participation were measured as well, such as interest in politics and political efficacy.

To gain an understanding of embeddedness of the Iranian diaspora in Western European societies, several questions were asked about, for example, the language that the participant speaks at home and outside one's home, how they perceive the status of the Iranian diaspora in the country of residence, and how much they were involved in, and trusted several institutions and organizations. Finally, a series of questions derived from social psychological theory were used to test more specific hypotheses about how the Iranian diaspora perceives and copes with their status in society, based mainly on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In order to get items that indeed measured the constructs, almost all of the questions used were derived either from existing global surveys such as the European Social Survey and World Value Survey, or items used in other previous scientific studies.

METHOD

Country specific items

 Apart from translating the questionnaire in the languages used in the different countries, some parts of the questionnaire had to be made country-specific as well. To some extent, this meant simply using the right country in the answer categories for items such as "where were you born?", but in other cases there were differences between the countries. This mainly applies to the questions about embeddedness, social status and the items for social creativity. Here, the participants were asked either where they would place the group of Iranian migrants compared to other ethnic groups in society in terms of social status, or how important it was to compare themselves with various other ethnic groups in society. Here, we choose several different ethnic groups per country that are generally thought to be different in social status and are most often discussed in the media or general discourse. For example in the Netherlands native Dutch people were used, Western-European-, Eastern-European-, Asian-, Turkish-, and Moroccan migrant because they are thought to differ in social status and these groups are talked about most often in the media. For the other countries, the same number of groups that are most relevant in that specific country were chosen.

Another concept that had to measured differently in each country was the past voting behavior. Participants were asked whether they had participated in the last local, national, and European elections. For each one of those questions, the specific date of the last election in the respective country was added. In addition, participants were asked which party they had voted for when they indicated they had voted in the last national election. Here, the specific political parties for each country were added.

Similarly, the question about the education level of the participants (according to the educational system currently in place in the various country of interest in this study) was adopted and added.

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Sample description

The aim was to collect a minimum of roughly 100 participants in each country to have enough statistical power for the analyses. In the end, 935 completed questionnaires were collected. In some countries, especially Switzerland, the number did not reach 100 participants which could be a reflection of the smaller absolute number of Iranian migrants in this country or the inability to reach them through the online communities in this country.
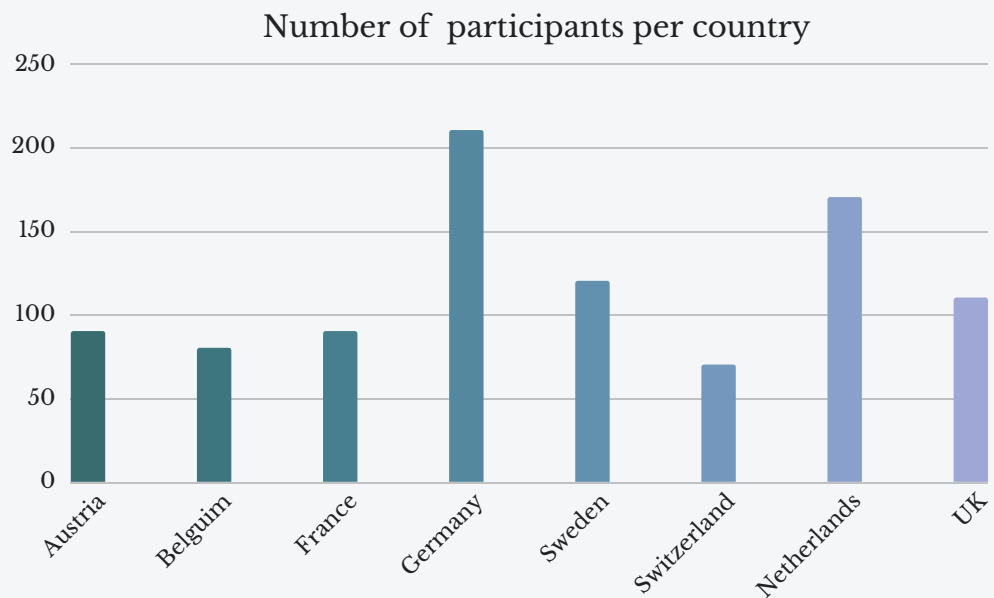
Figure 1: *Number of participants per country*
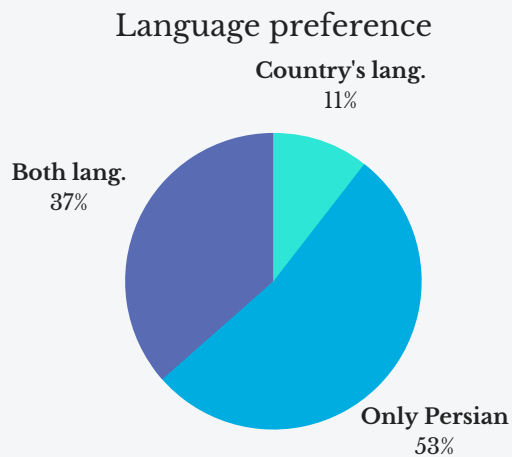
Figure 2: *Language preferences of the participants*

FINDINGS

Participants were asked in which language they were most comfortable to complete the questionnaire. The majority of the participants indicated a preference for Persian (53%) while 36.5% of the participants were comfortable completing the questionnaire in both languages. A smaller number of participants (10.5%) were comfortable completing it in only the native language of the country they lived in. This smaller number is not very surprising, given the finding that the vast majority of the participants were born in Iran (96%). Not surprisingly, the parents of the participants were to an even larger extent born both in Iran (97.5%). Most of the participants were between 26 and 40 years old (Figure 3), which could be ascribed partly to the sampling strategy of using an online survey. Regarding the legal status of the participants, there were quite some differences per country and the results are presented separately for each country in the study (Figure 4).
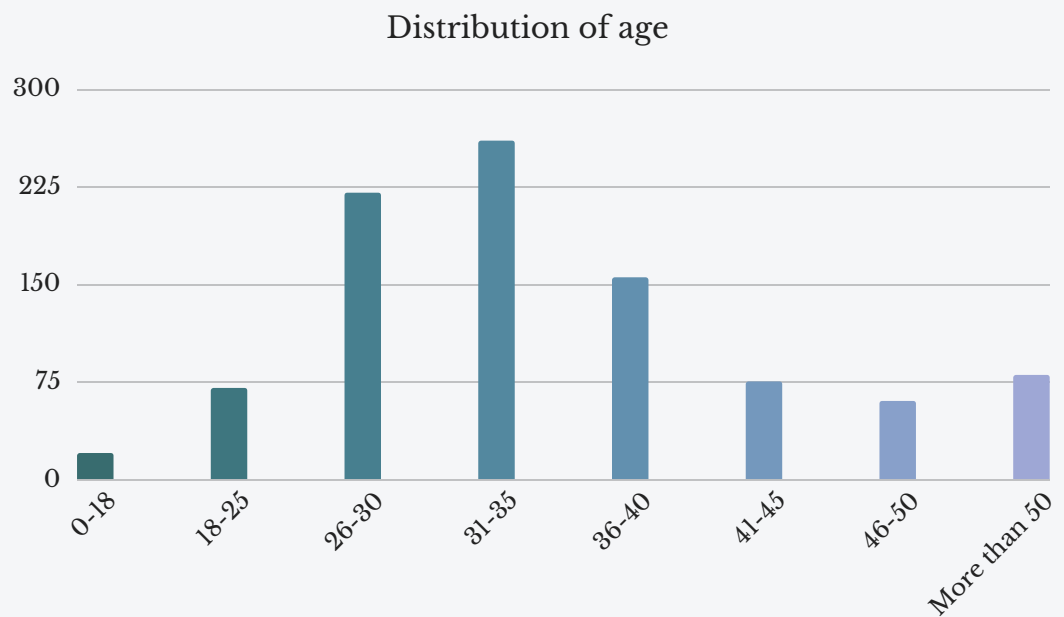
Distribution of age

Figure 3: *Age of the participants*

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Legal Status in Country of Residence
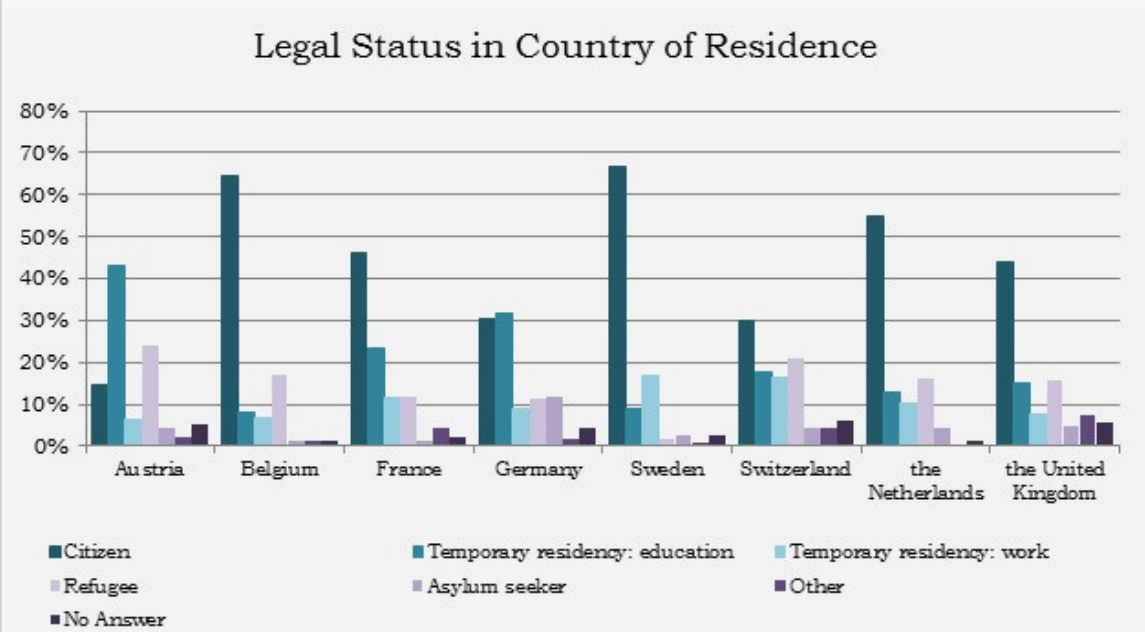
Figure 4: *Legal status of the participants per country*

Occupational status

A: Self-employed; B:Employed with a temporary contract; C: Employed with a permanent contract; D: In education; E:Unemployed and actively looking for job; F: Unemployed and not actively looking for job; G: Permanently sick or disabled; H: Retired; I: Doing housework, looking for job; J: Other
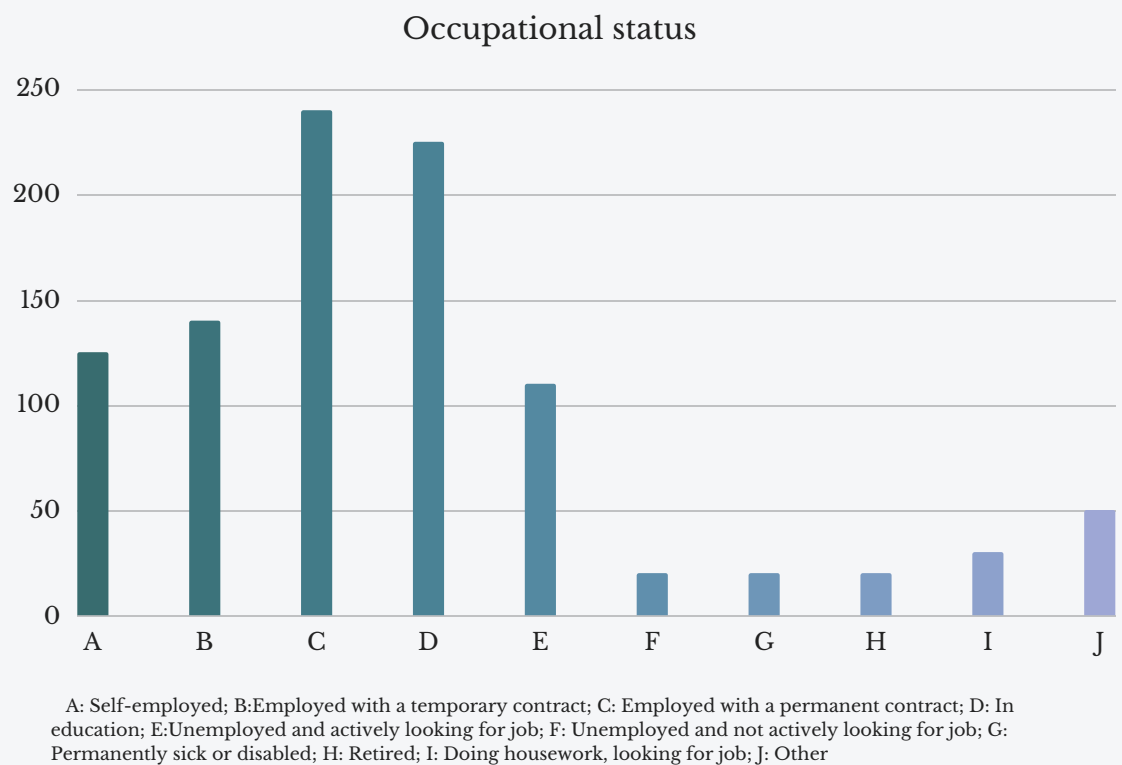
Figure 5: *Occupational status of the participants*

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Further description of the participants came from questions on occupational status and income where it is evident that the most common description of their day-to-day activities was being employed with a permanent contract or following education (Figure 5) while having a satisfactory income (Figure 6).

Subjective income

A: Living comfortably on present income
B: Copying on present income
C: Difficult on present income
D: Very difficult on present income
E: Don't know/ No answer
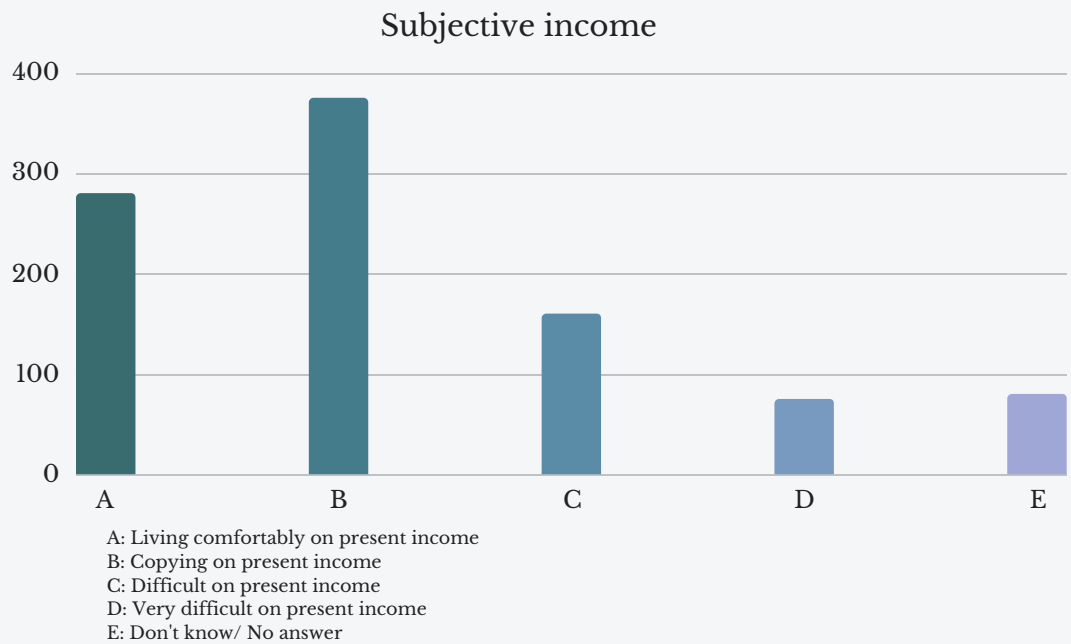
Figure 6: *Subjective income of the participants*

Being an Iranian migrant in a Western European society

In the previous section, an overall image of Iranian migrants in Western Europe based on several different factors were shown. The next step is to see how Iranian migrants relate to other groups in society, and how actively they participate in West European societies. This is examined in several ways, ranging from how embedded Iranian migrants perceive themselves to be in their new country of residence to how active they are in politics.

Starting with social embeddedness, participants were asked to indicate how many people who visited their home were from which country originally, to see whether they interacted mostly with other Iranian migrants or other groups in society. Figure 8 shows that the highest number of interactions were with people from other countries than Iran or the country they live in, although the other averages indicate a diverse social network of people.
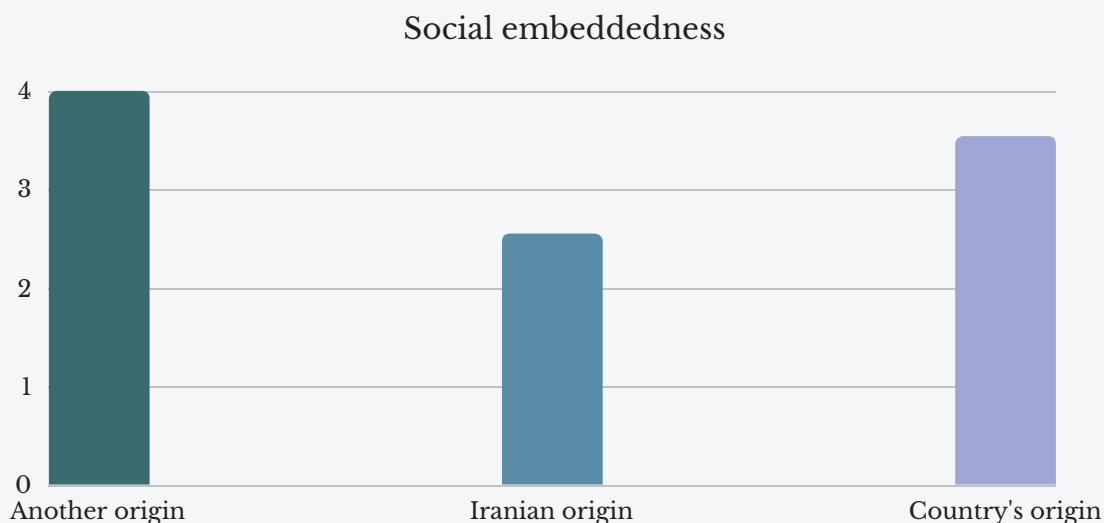
FINDINGS

Social embeddedness

Figure 7: *How many of the people visiting you at home are of … (1= almost all … 5= none)*

Another way of looking at embeddedness in society is to look at perceptions of social status. Participants were asked to rank several ethnic or migrant groups based on social status and found that Iranian migrants ranked themselves as the third highest in terms of social status. This means that they perceive both native citizens and Western European migrants to rank higher, but all other migrant groups as lower than themselves.

Social status order
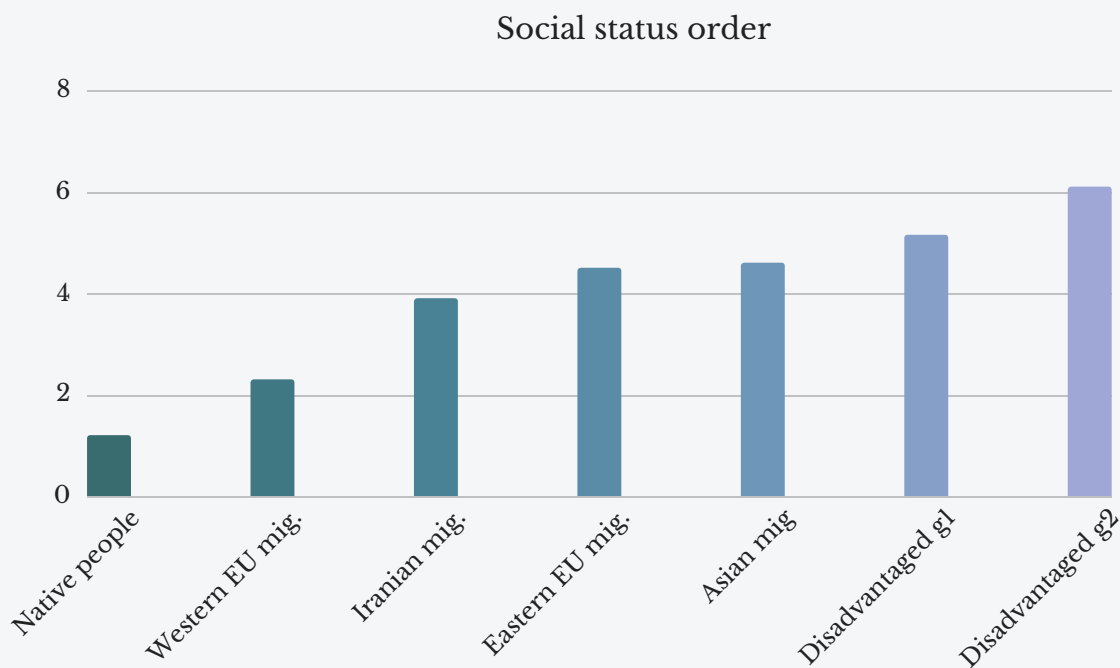
Figure 8: *"Considering the social status of different ethnic or migrants groups in the 'country', where would you place Iranian migrants in society?"*

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In addition to social status, how active Iranian migrants were in organizations in Western Europe was examined. The number of people involved in charity organizations and sports organizations was quite high, but membership in organizations in general was of considerable importance.
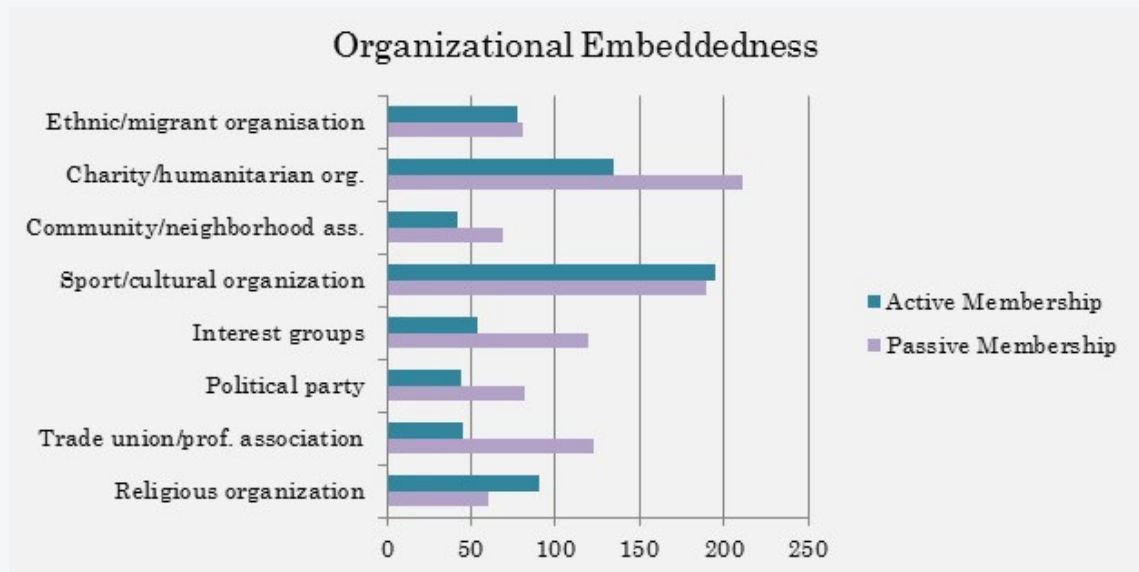
Organizational Embeddedness

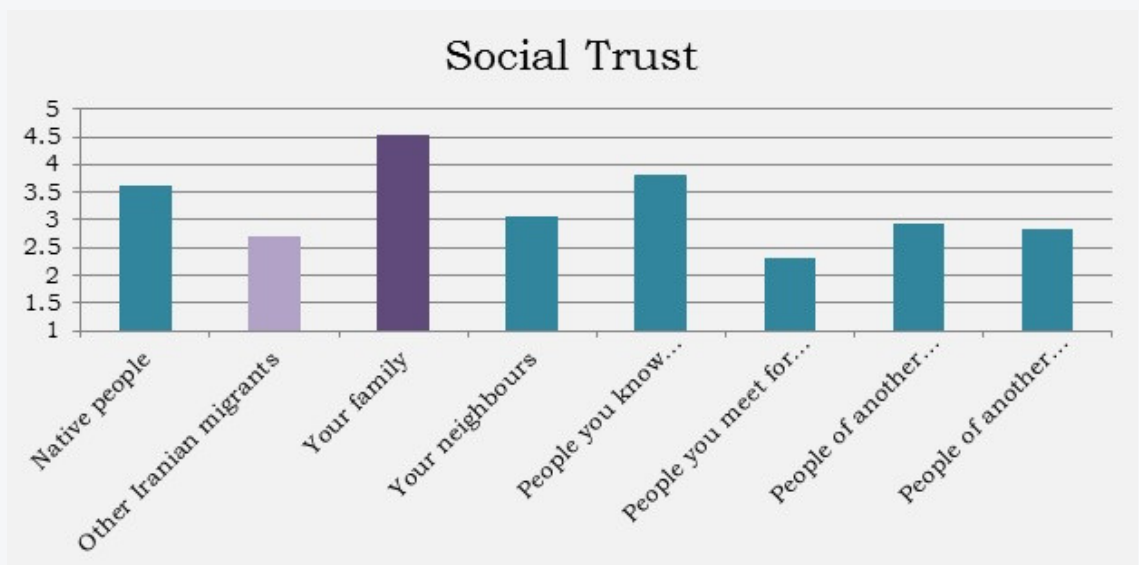Figure 9: *Organizational embeddedness in the country of residence*

Social Trust

Figure 10: *Social trust of the participants*

FINDINGS

Both social trust and trust in institutions are important separate factors that determine involvement in society and politics (Newton, 2001). Participants were asked to indicate their level of trust in several social groups and institutions. Regarding social trust, a surprisingly low trust in other Iranian migrants compared to trust in the native citizens of the country was observed. Family is trusted very much (Figure 10). Political parties in the country of residence are trusted the least of all the organizations and institutions, whereas the judicial system was trusted the most (Figure 11).
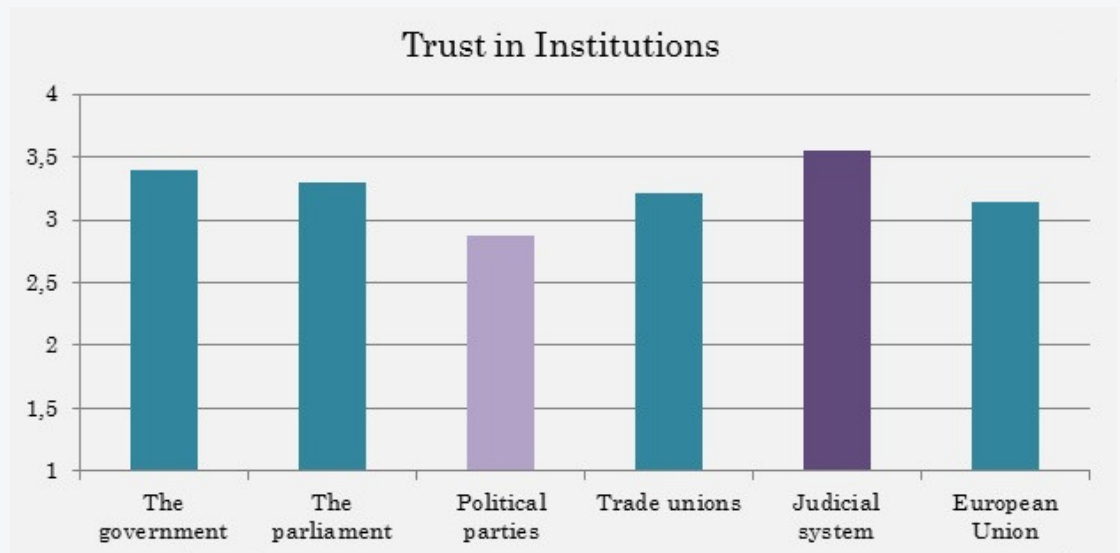
Figure 11: Trust in different institutions in the country of residence

Figure 12 shows to what extent Iranian migrants in the study experienced threats to their identity. First and foremost, being considered a migrant is seen as the biggest threat of Iranian migrants in Western Europe. The participants expressed the low trust in other fellow Iranian migrants, at the same time, not being accepted by this group is the lowest form of threat to their identity.
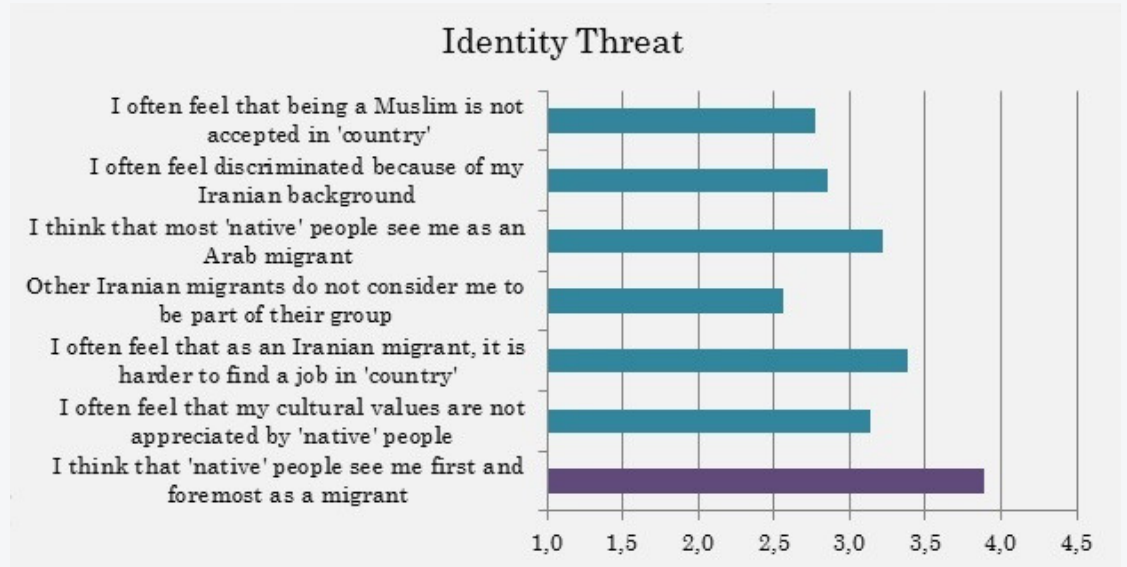
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Identity Threat

Figure 12: *Means of several forms of threats to the identity of Iranian migrants*
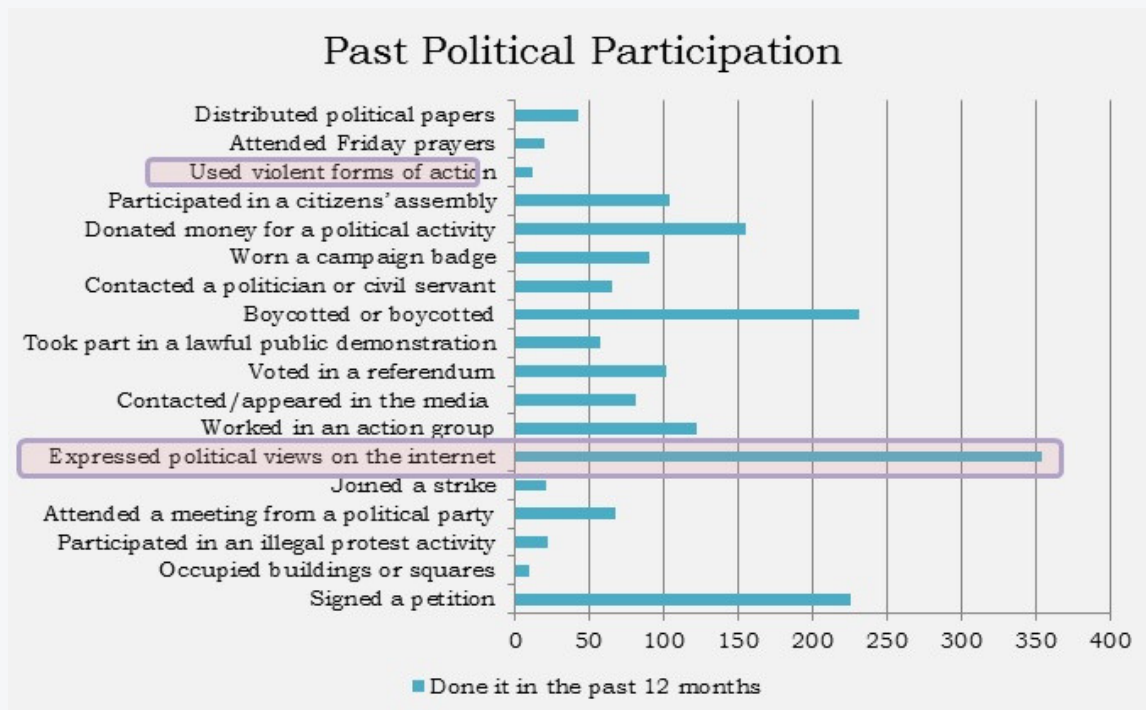
Past Political Participation

Figure 13: *Number of people who engaged in several forms of political participation in the past 12 months in the country of residence*

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Cultural Integration

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with several statements about cultural values. In general, liberal and secular values were preferred with very strong support for equal treatment of men and women and little support for a mandatory headscarf for Muslim women in public were observed.

Figure 14: *Adherence to several values as an indication of cultural integration in Western Europe*

In depth: Reason of migration and length of residence in Western Europe

Among the multiple factors that were measured in the study of Iranian migrants in Western Europe, two showed interesting correlations. Firstly, it was interesting to examine the relationship between the reason for emigration from Iran to how people experience their position in society and how it influences, for example, trust in the new country of residence. Secondly, the relationship between length in Western Europe and identification as a minority group.
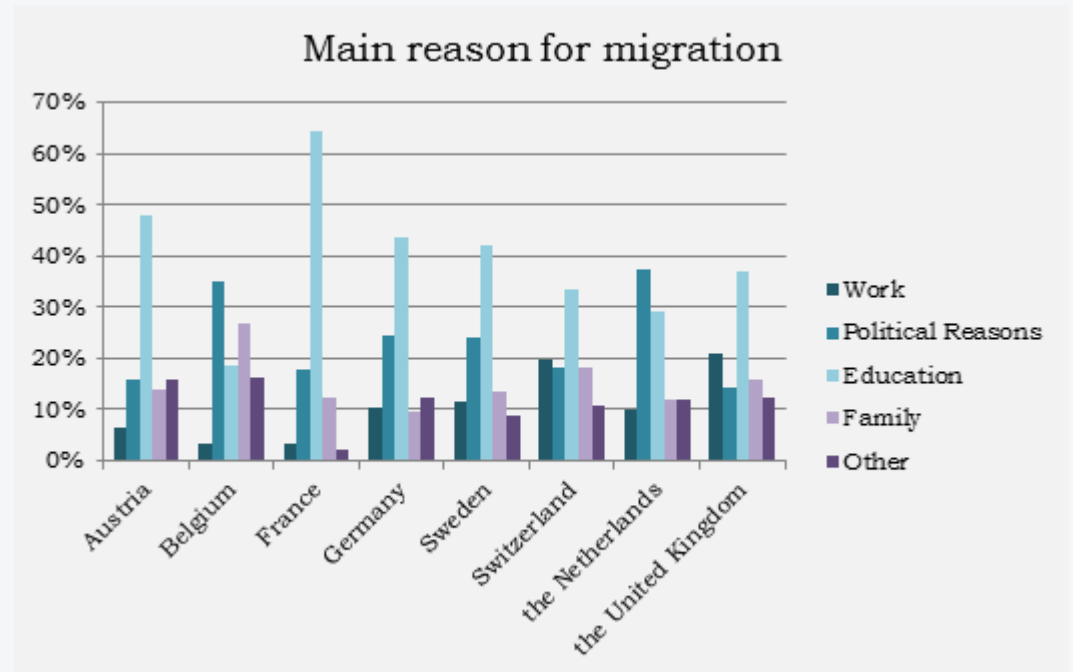
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Reasons for migration

Figure 15: *The main reason of migrating from Iran to each Western European country in the study*

Education is the most prominent reason for Iranians to migrate to Western Europe, but political reasons are also mentioned often as the most important reason to leave Iran (Figure 15). These different reasons are related to measures of social capital (Figure 16). It is not surprising that the level of education is higher for people who migrate to follow education in Western Europe but the reverse pattern is seen for people who migrate for work reasons and experience their income as less satisfactory compared to people who migrate for other reasons. People who migrate for political reasons are the least likely to return to Iran whereas the people who migrate for work, education, or their family show a greater likelihood to return to Iran one day.

Regarding involvement in politics, participants who migrated for political reasons are especially likely to be involved in online political activism (Figure 17). They are also most likely to vote, although this number is even higher for people who migrated for family reasons. People who migrated for work are the least active in politics, as shown by lower levels of voting and almost zero involvement in non-institutionalized forms of political action such as street demonstrations (Figure 17).
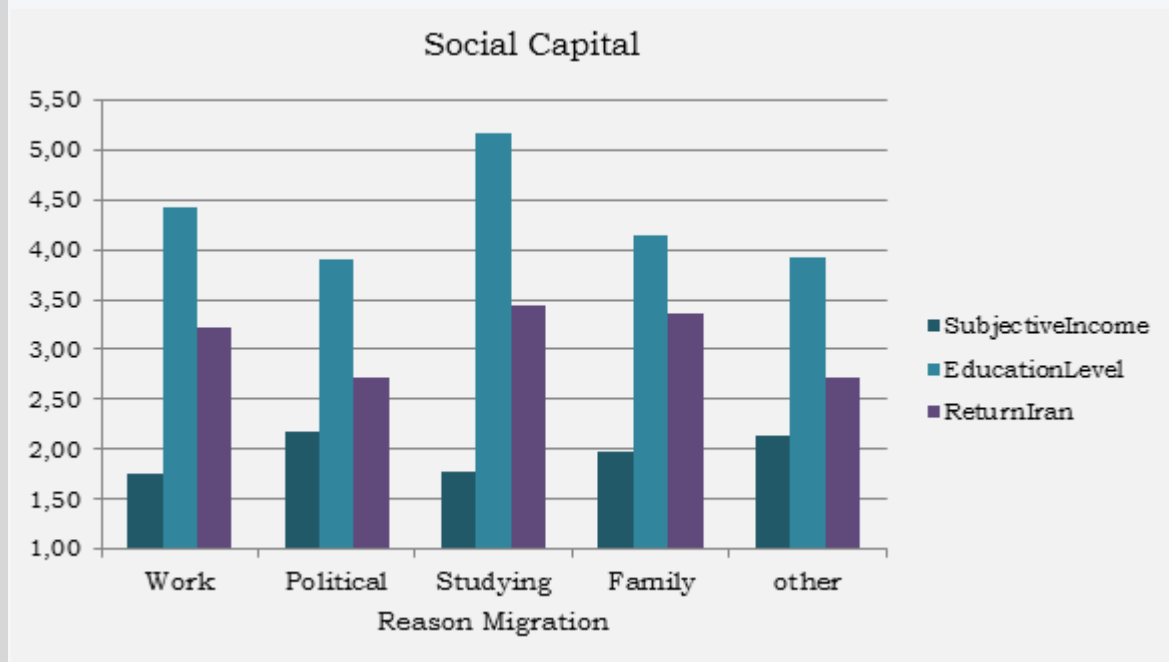
FINDINGS

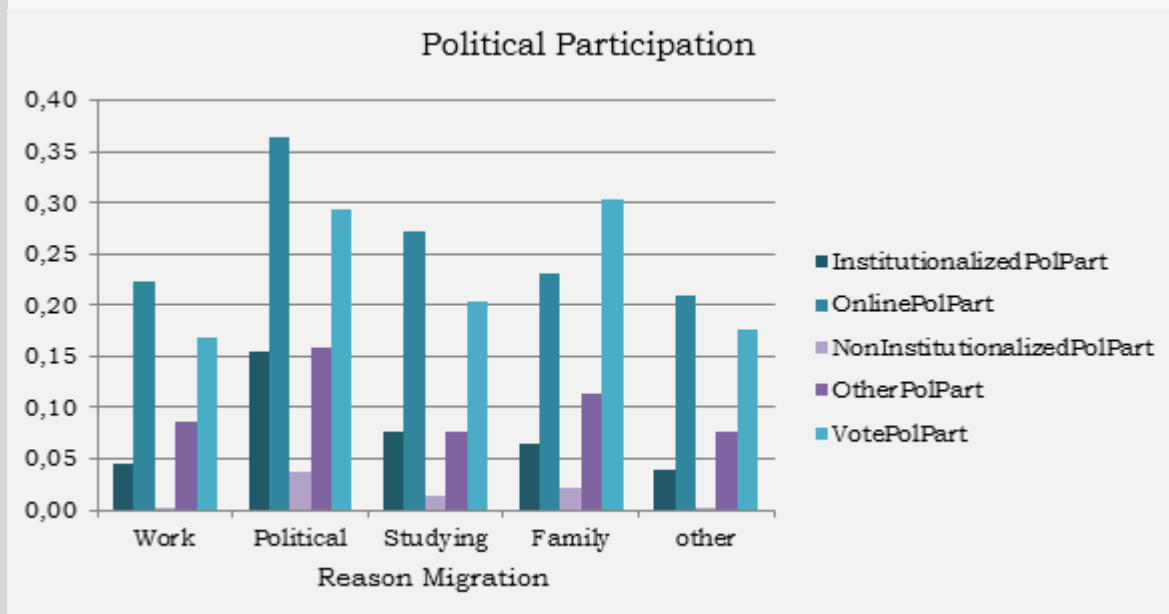Figure 16: *Three measures of social capital in relation to the reason for migration*

Figure 17: *Involvement in forms of political action in the country of residence in relation to the main reason for migration to Western Europe*
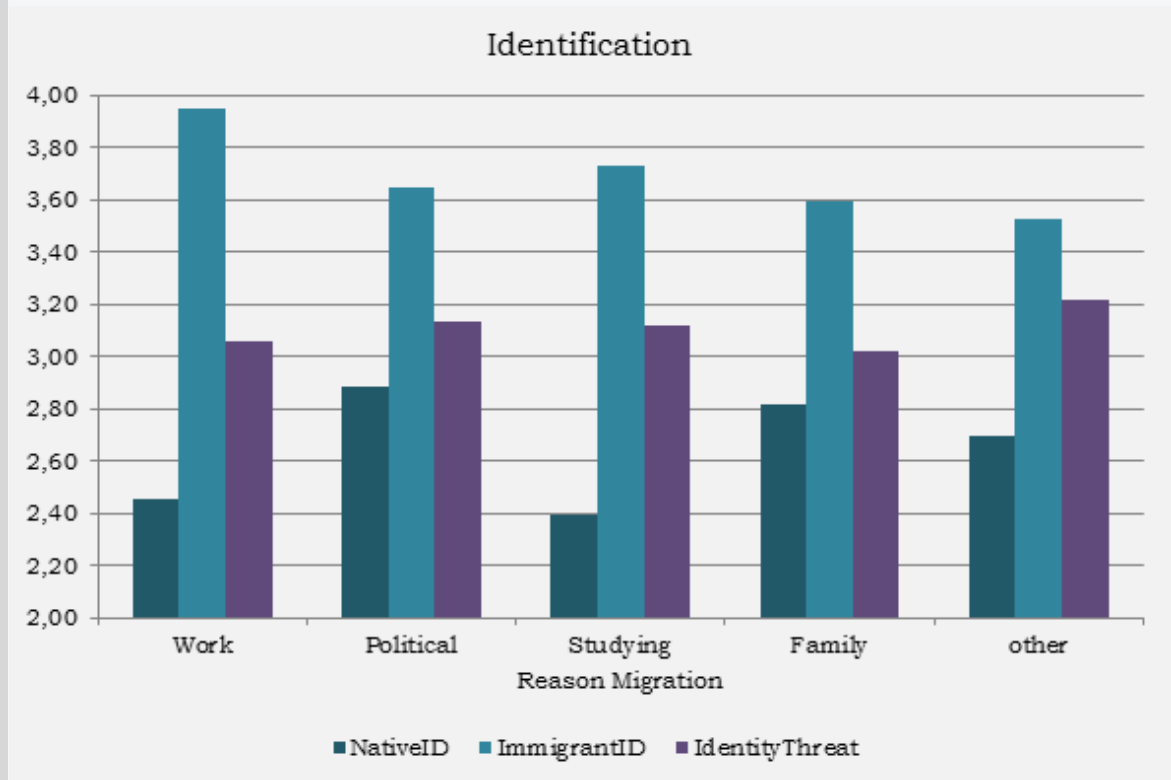
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Identification

Figure 18: *Identification as a native citizen of the country of residence, as an immigrant, and the experienced level of identity threat in relation to the main reason of migration to Western Europe*
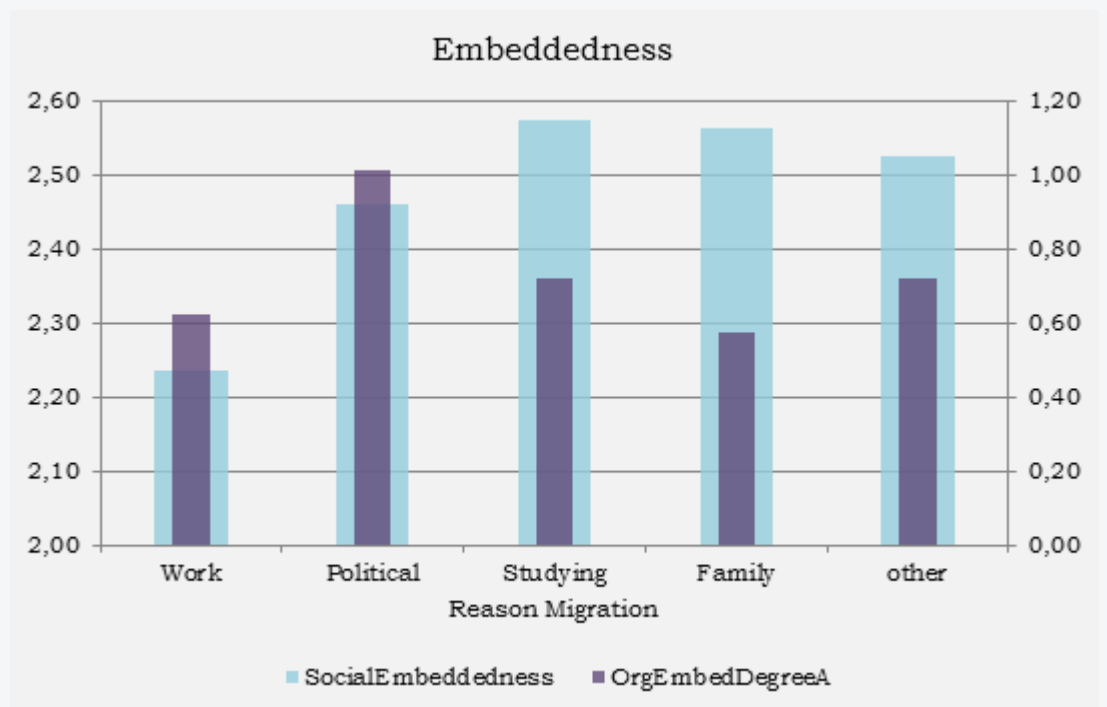

Figure 19: *Social and organizational embeddedness in relation to the main reason for migration to Western Europe*

FINDINGS

For social embeddedness, participants who migrated for work reasons seem to be the least socially involved in the new country in Western Europe they live in. While this group are involved in organizations, they are not socially embedded in society (Figure 19) compared to people who migrated for other reasons.
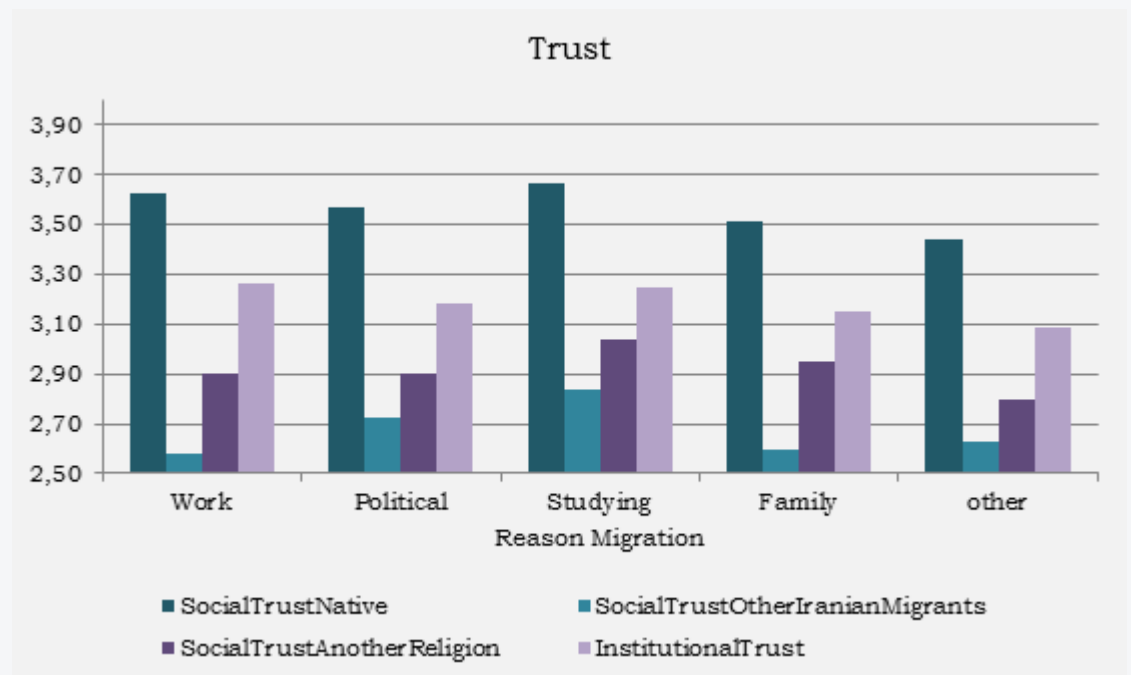

Figure 20: *Social and institutional trust in relation to the main reason of migration to Western Europe*
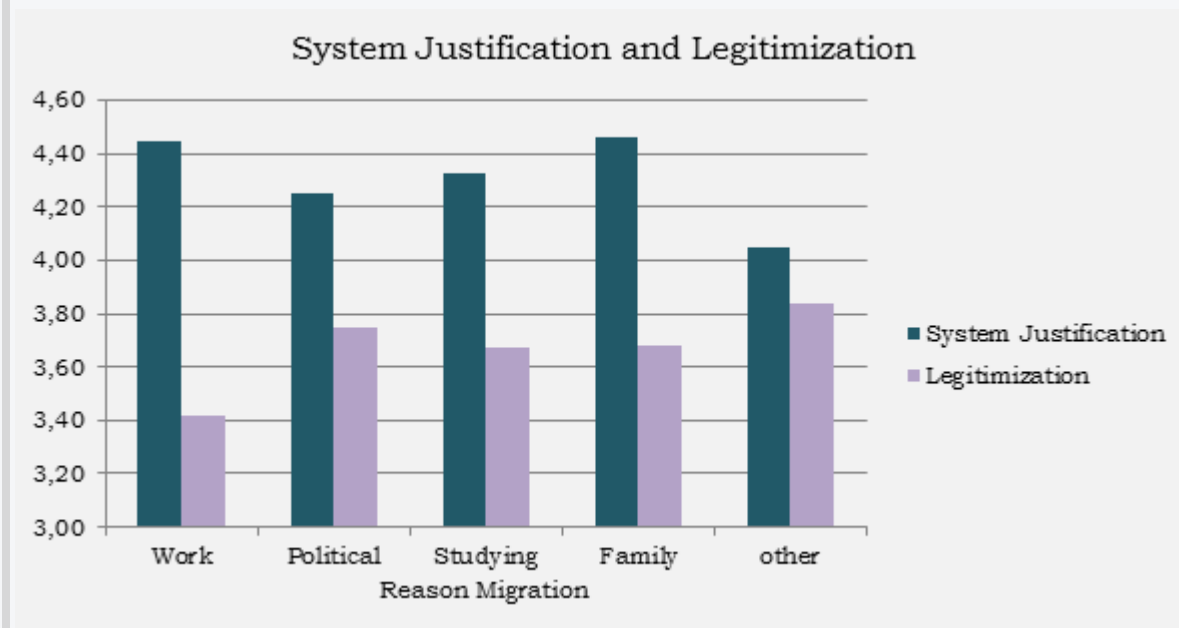

Figure 21: *Perception of the social and political system in the Western European country being fair and legitimate in relation to the reason for migration.*

FINDINGS

Number of years in Western Europe

Along with the reason for migration, interesting relationships between the number of years that Iranian migrants had lived in Western Europe, their level of trust and perceptions of society was observed. Below, participants have been separated in 6 groups of those who lived in Western Europe: shorter than 2 years, 2-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years, and more than 30 years. Whereas, some of the effects of living longer in a certain country are in line with expectations, for example, that people identity themselves more as citizens of the country and less as immigrants (Figure 24) and are more socially and organizationally embedded when they live in the country for a long time (Figure 23), other relationships are more surprising.
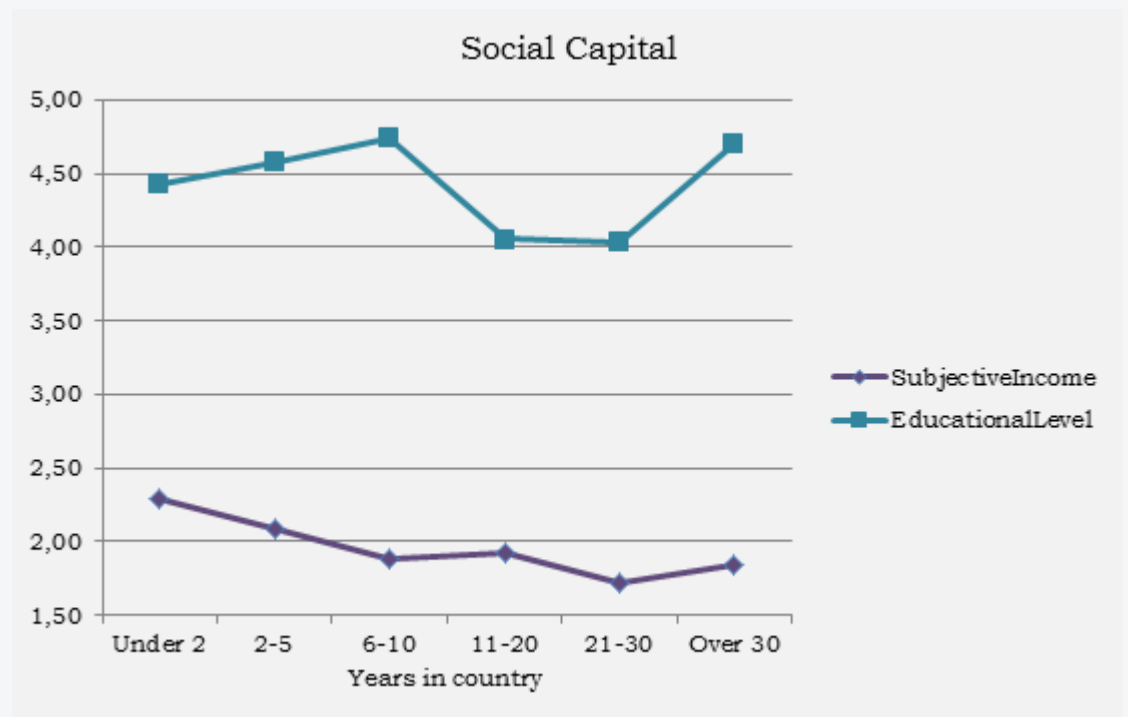

Figure 22: *Income and education level in relation to the number of years someone has lived in the Western European country*
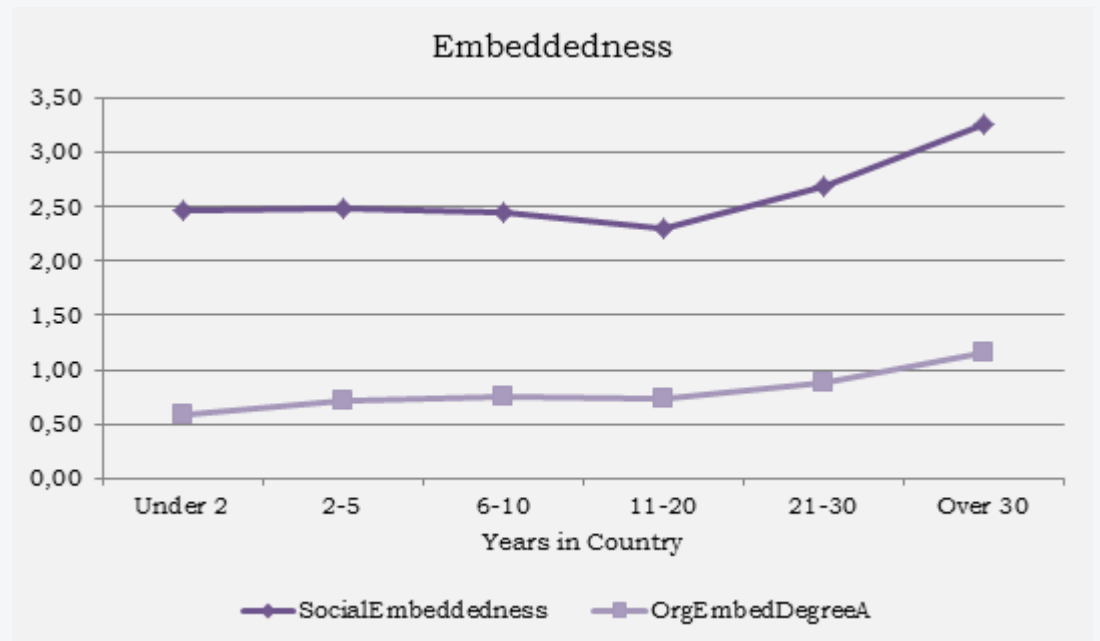
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Figure 23: *Social and organizational embeddedness in relation to the number of years someone has lived in the Western European country*
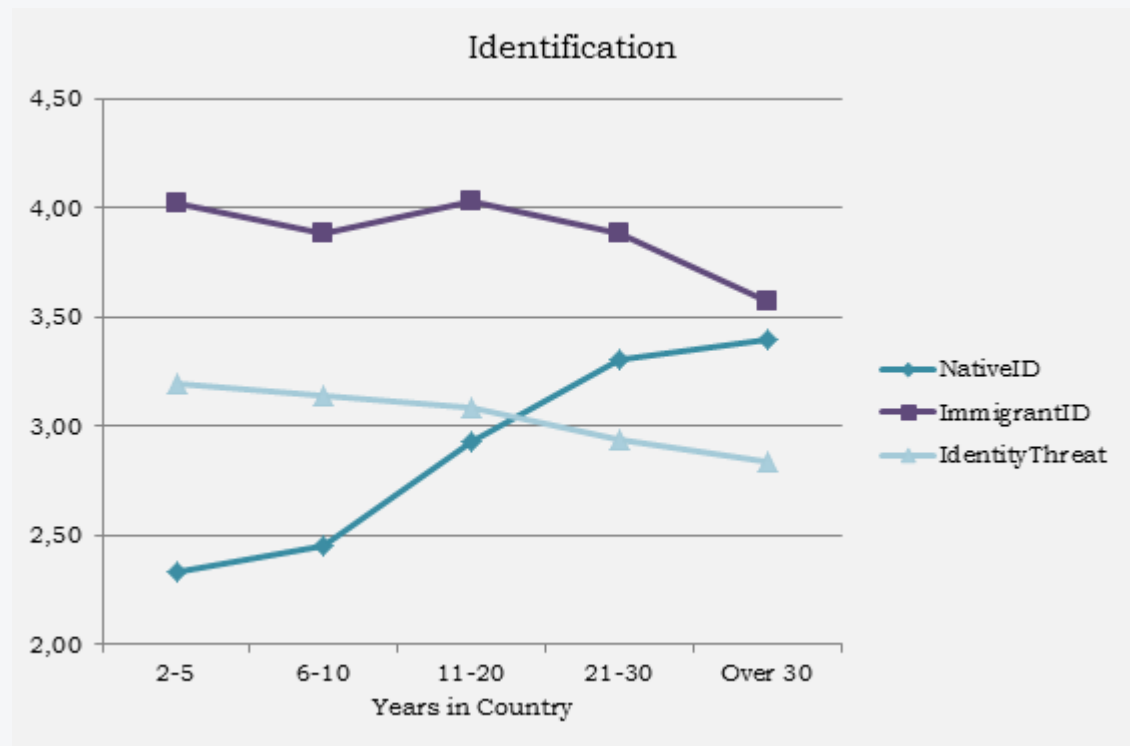

Figure 24: *Social and organizational embeddedness in relation to the number of years someone has lived in the Western European country*
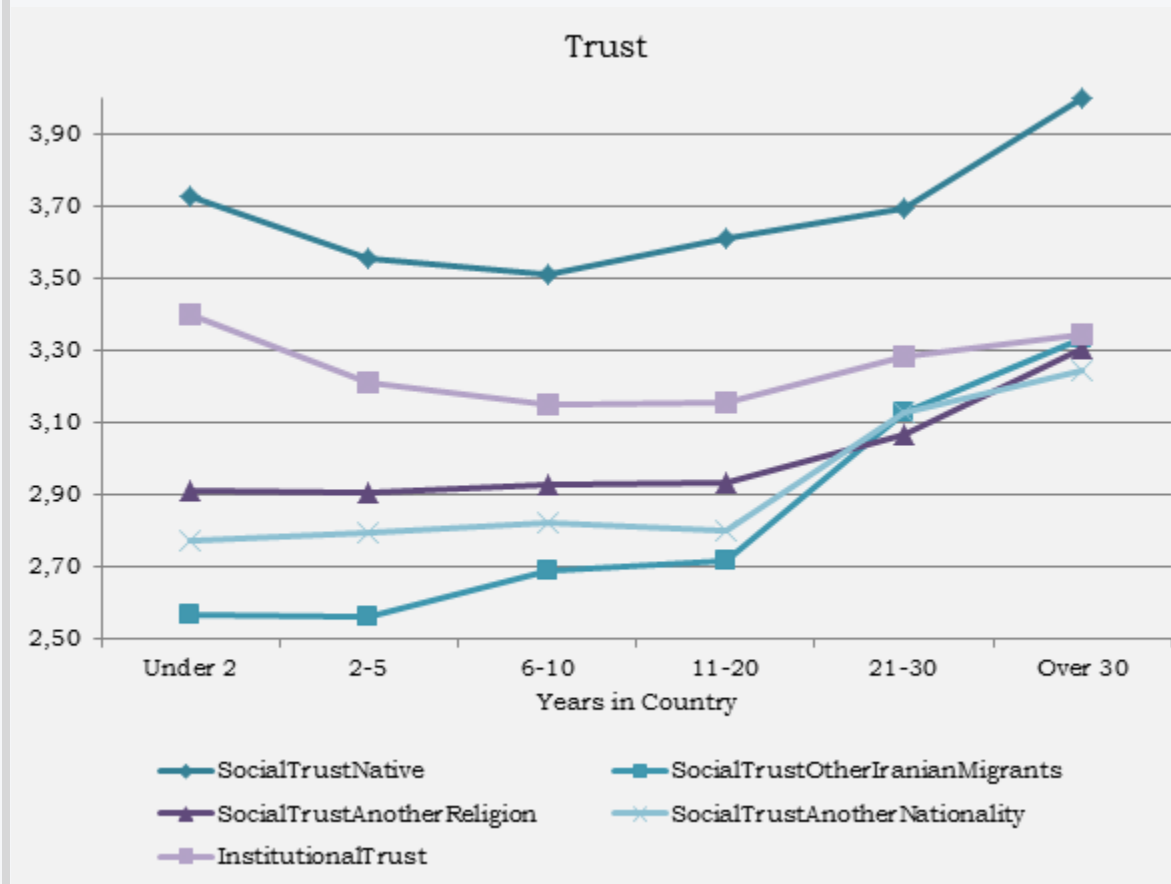
Figure 25: *Different forms of trust in relation to the number of years someone has lived in the Western European country*

Both for the level of trust and the perceptions of how fair the social and political system in the country of residence, an interesting and surprising pattern is observed, where the mean levels are somewhat high for people who have only recently migrated and people who have lived in the Western European country for 20 or more years. For the people that live in the country between 2-10 years, however, there seems to be a lack of social and institutional trust compared to these two other groups (Figure 25). They find society to be less fair and less often is their "new country" seen as the best country in the world to live in (Figure 26). When asked whether the status relations between groups in society are legitimate or fair, to people who live longer in the country, this is perceived to be the case more and more (Figure 26; "legitimization").

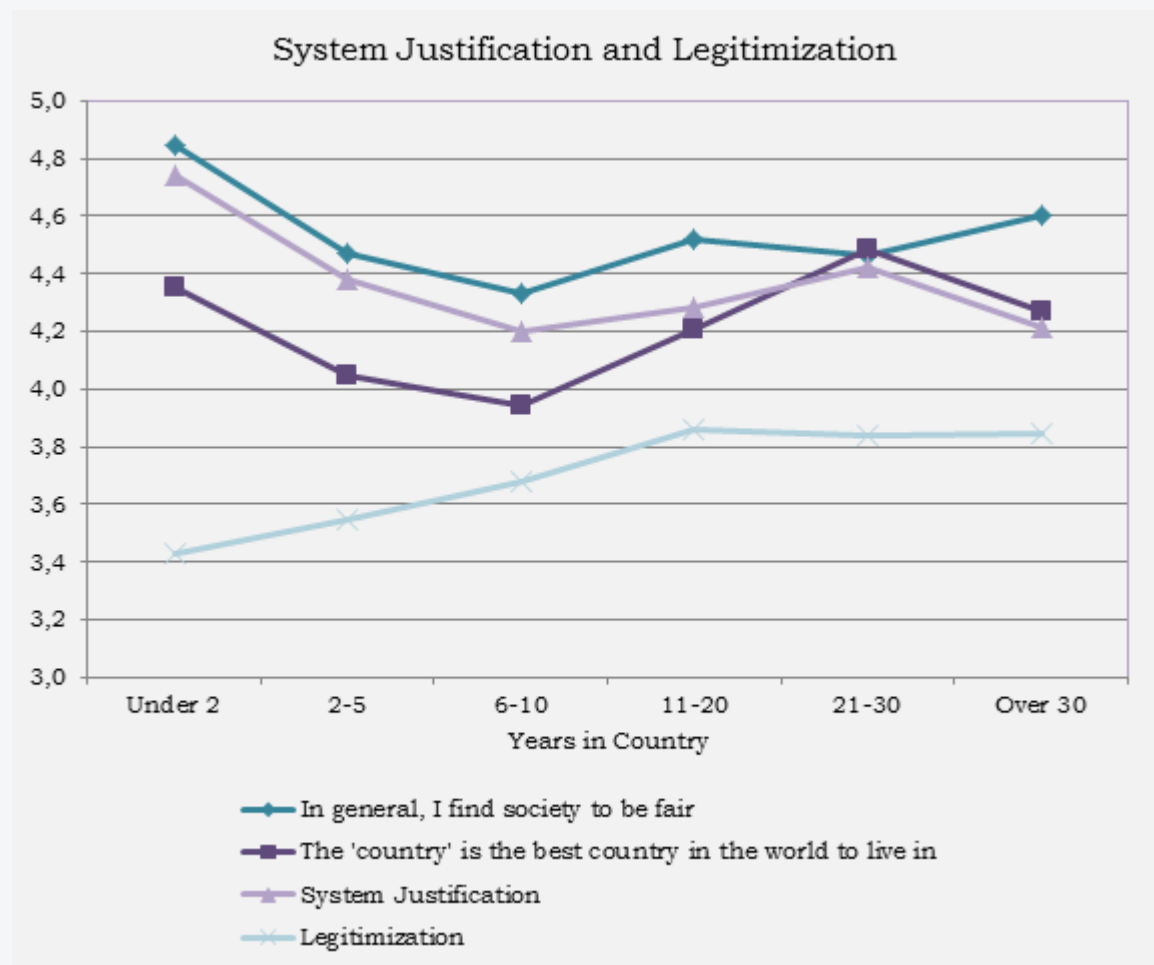## System Justification and Legitimization

Figure 26: *Experience a fair and just social and political system in the country of residence, and legitimacy of intergroup relations in this country in relation to the number of years someone has lived in the Western European country*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The starting point of this study was how to characterize the group of Iranian migrants in Western Europe. In line with previous findings (e.g. Lewin, 2001), most of the participants in our study are well educated, usually attending some form of education or employed with a permanent contract, and mostly they report satisfaction with their current income. Regarding their position in society however, there is a paradox between cultural and social embeddedness which is relatively high. Iranian migrants still identify themselves as being Iranian or a migrant, indicating that there might be a process of integration rather than assimilation in the host society (Berry, 1997).

Another interesting and surprising finding is that in terms of social trust, Iranian migrants tend to have the least trust in fellow Iranian immigrants whereas trust in their family but also native citizens is much higher. The group of people who lived in Western Europe for 2-10 years show a different pattern than recent migrants (under 2 years) or people who have lived in Western Europe for longer (10+). Those who have lived in Western Europe for 2-10 years show lower trust, and lower legitimization of the social and political system. This finding could be a good avenue for further research into the over-time effects of migration. Perhaps people who recently moved to Western Europe still have low expectations, are less engaged and might be easily satisfied, whereas the subsequent years and with further socializing, a grimmer picture of the country of residence is formed.

Political participation is especially prevalent amongst Iranians who migrated for political reasons. For all participants, online activism seems to be the preferred strategy but a substantial number of people vote as well. Radical or violent action has virtually no support.

The reason for migrating and the number of years that a participant lived in Western Europe had interesting relationships with several other factors. People who come for political reasons, have a lower social capital /higher perceived identity threat despite relatively high political participation, but still a high willingness to integrate. People who migrate for work seem to be the ones that are least involved in the new society, have lower levels of political participation and trust.

There are some limitations to the current study and based on the current sample of 935 participants, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the whole population of Iranian migrants in Western Europe. It is likely that due to the chosen sampling strategy using online advertisements, a younger audience has been reached, one which is actively involved in online Iranian diaspora communities. Nevertheless, there were many participants per country and the current design still allows for interesting observations in the relationship between duration of stay in Western Europe and the reasons of migration with several other factors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even with the limitations of sample size and representativeness, nevertheless, the information obtained, especially with regards to the perceptions of Iranian migrants' position in society, identity, and embeddedness is a very good starting step which warrants further research both within the Iranian migrant and diaspora community and indeed other migrant communities.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AUTHORS

The research project 'The role and impact of Iranian migrants in Western Europe' is conducted by researchers from the Department of Sociology at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam in collaboration with the Simorgh, a non-profit organization, to contribute to a better understanding of the societal position, societal and political participation, and embeddedness of Iranian migrants in various Western European countries.

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The Simorgh is a private, apolitical, non-governmental and nonpartisan international organisation based in Vienna. Its aim is to encourage cultural and social exchange between countries and peoples, specifically starting with an exchange of thoughts and ideas between Iran and the European Union in order to develop, enhance and improve human development and communication.

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