

**“Perceptions and opinions of
Russian and Ukrainian
immigrants about associations
of Eastern immigrants in Lisbon”**

Maria Manuela Mendes

Initial questions:

- What solutions are given by immigrant associations concerning difficulties, problems and requests of those immigrants?
- How do immigrants and some of the socio-institutional agents evaluate the contribution of immigrants' associations?
- Do immigrants recognise their contribution and feel represented by associations of immigrant basis?

Associations – some functions:

- a) They may play a key role in the reconstruction of the cultural identities of immigrant groups in a migratory context.
- b) They may favour and facilitate the establishment of social networks in the ingroups and in the relationship with the outgroups.
- c) They may also perform the function of mediation between the immigrant and the society (e.g. state agencies).
- d) They can be a space for the development of communitarian networks of sociability and solidarity.
- e) They may alert to the problems and difficulties of these immigrants and even point out solutions.

A “new migratory wave”

Immigrants from Central and Eastern European countries, some numbers:

- Until the end of 2004, the number of immigrants with their situation legally authorised via Stay Allowances^[1] (Autorizações de Permanência in portuguese language) reached:
- 64,730 Ukrainians (+1,360 Residence Permission)^[2] or Autorização de Residência),
- 7,053 Russians (+1,124 residents)
- 12,647 Moldovans,
- 10,944 Romanians

^[1] Autorizações de Permanência or Stay Allowance is a legal mechanism created in 2001 by portuguese government in face the large number of new migrants from Eastern Europe. It's a kind of temporary stay permission, only for a year and if the migrant has a legal work contract. Every year the person must renew the permission and have a new legal contract. Recently, this mechanism was abolished.

^[2] Source SEF (Foreigners' and Borders' Services), provisional data from 2004.

A “new migratory wave”: some initial questions

- Various factors contributed to this phenomenon:
 - a) permissiveness and legislation gaps about immigrants;
 - b) existence of job offers, namely in the building construction and public works;
 - c) informal activity of operators known as “travel agencies” that peculiarly arranged the whole process of travelling from the home country until the settlement of the individual in Portugal;
 - d) the initial quite good welcome of the Portuguese society.

A “new migratory wave”: some initial questions

■ Some “social problems”:

1. Absence or inefficiency of informal solidarities among these immigrants.
2. Mainly in 2003, and to a great extent due to the economic crisis of the country, we had to face the arrival of unemployed and homeless immigrants, without any kind of subsistence and supporting.
3. Appearance of a “new form of criminality”, in which the immigrants themselves were victims of their own fellow citizens.
4. Continuous action of “organised networks” that in the home country kept on wrongly informing the local populations that it would be easy to find a job in Portugal and earn a good salary.
5. **The housing problem**
 - When they started coming to Portugal (in 1999 and 2000), many of them put up at pensions, outbuildings or even building yards or other unstable and precarious housing situations, some provided by employers.
 - Nowadays there are still many who live in poor and overcrowded housing conditions.
 - Most of the interviewed immigrants (26 out of 34) share lodging (in flats or parts of houses) with other fellow citizens.

What is the contribution of immigrants' associations?

- 2003-2004, there were 10 immigrants' associations that intervened in AML (Lisbon Metropolitan Area) and Setúbal Peninsula.
- The associations we have contacted (5 out of 10), appeared in 2000 or later, and they were founded and mainly composed by Russian and Ukrainian immigrants (4), and only one by Romanians.
- They derived from the associative movement of ethnic-national character, assuming themselves as an instrument of social and political intervention for the defence of the collective interests of immigrant groups from some Eastern European countries.
- The main reason of their foundation is basically the need to facilitate the immigrants' access to information media and agencies, because of the communication problems with the state organisations and services.
- The most wanted activities are: information about how to get the family together, clarifying questions about job activities and how to get legal and juridical support.

What is the contribution of immigrants' associations?

■ Associations, some intervention areas:

- a) It is about the legislation process that the associations receive a larger number of requests and some of them just guided the immigrants to other entities, since they have neither means nor infra-structures to solve this and other matters.
- b) Recently, though occasionally and informally, some of them have started to re-update the distinctive features of the home culture, thus contributing to the identity affirmation of immigrants' groups, through the involvement in excursions, parties with folk music, traditional dances and native handicraft, and holiday camps for the children. One of these associations has a radio programme and another one publishes a newspaper.
- c) They all recognise they haven't supported immigrants when looking for a job or housing, although these are the most frequent requests.

What is the contribution of immigrants' associations?

- d) in Lisbon there are some associations that in cooperation with the embassy are providing an alternative educational curriculum during the week and at weekends, such as it happens in Russia. In this way, immigrants' children can attend both educational systems.
- This loss of bond with their parents' country is reflected on the fact that these children *"can no longer communicate with their grandparents in their own language"* (Vladislav, 29 years old, Russian, legalised, no children, graduate).

Maria is ten years old and attends the fourth year. Every Saturday since 2004 she travels from Barreiro to Lisbon where she attends a school with Russian educational curriculum. The classes take place between 10.30 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. with Russian teachers. She confesses she only attends these lessons because her mother forces her to.

"How was it then?"

My mother did. Someone told my mother there was a school, so she told me: 'You're going to that school' and I said 'I don't want to, no, otherwise I'll forget Portuguese'. And then she forced me, she said I have to, I have to learn Russian." (10 years old, Russian, pupil, lives with parents)

What do immigrants think about immigrants' associations?

- 1) Some of these associations do exist formally but in practice, they have no financial resources, no employees or volunteers, no own facilities.
- 2) This kind of associations has a small intervention in these groups of immigrants, justified by the lack of associative tradition and a certain mistrust concerning organised groups of their own compatriots.
- 3) They prefer to look for support in religious organisations or private ones ("mediators") even if they have to pay to these mediators.

Irina is a leader of a Association of Russian Immigrants and she is quite aware of the lack of interest of her fellow countrymen, and she says:

"(...) in our country we never look for the support of associations. It all depends on our effort and will... In our time nobody helped! Another thing is the lack of confidence... people think about some bad cases in that Russian or Ukrainian association and they are suspicious... They prefer to give up the problem, to forget it or look for friends' advice... but they give up..." (Russian nationality and Ukrainian citizenship, 35 years old).

- 4) Among "Eastern immigrants" there is no internal homogeneity nor among the several nationalities (e.g. Among Russians, Moldovans, Romanians),¹⁰ nor in the several groups of immigrants (Ukrainians pro-Russians and

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- 5) Those who came to Portugal before 2001 must have turned for aid to a mediator, usually a native from Eastern European countries who could already speak Portuguese and well placed in the informal economic sector, who knew how to move easily through a vast relationship web (among employers and employees).

Those who turned for aid to this system were often caught in an exploitation and dependence web, since some agents were connected with criminal organisations whose performance was very violent and dangerous (immigrants themselves or their relatives were threatened to death, victims of physical cruelties, among other practices); while others acted at a different level, in small extortion groups that, under physical and psychological coercion, extorted money or other values (valuable objects, passport...) from the immigrants.

What do immigrants think about immigrants' associations?

- a) As time goes by, the request for institutional support concerning a vacancy in the job market (but not only) has also been revealed as more and more frequent.
- b) After staying with us 2-3 years, unemployed immigrants look without difficulty for state and private institutions that offer social help, as for example: Job Centre, Jesuit Service for Refugees (JRS), Friendly Door from Olaias, the Association Immigrant Solidarity and the Church (Catholic, Greek-Roman, and Orthodox).
- c) In general the interviewees have an unfavourable opinion about the support that those associations can give. Only two men occupy leading posts in these associations, the same number of effectives say they participate but only as members.

What do immigrants think about immigrants' associations?

- d) Sergey considers these associations as a mere "*waste of time*" (43 years old, Russian, legalised, industry and building construction worker).
- e) Some of the interviewees regret the action of these associations is not clearly and transparently known. They complain about and criticise that support, which is not usually immediate and rapid and because these organisations charge honoraria beforehand. In this context, Leonid questions back the researcher: "*What do they do? Do you know? They may welcome you, but if you actually have any problems, what do they do? Let's call on the lawyer; you can find a lawyer yourself.*" (40 years old, Russian legalised, industry and building construction worker)
- f) Another interviewee shows an even more radical position, by saying that these organisations just aim at getting "economic benefits". So, Elena says that the first objective of these associations is to "earn money":
"*For me, they have already a great help. I don't know what it is like in other countries, maybe in Italy they also have a great help... But I think Portugal, so small and poor, has helped much.*" (34 years old, Russian, legalised, married to a Portuguese citizen, administration, commerce and services employee).
- g) A weak adhesion to association movement by these immigrants.

Conclusions

1. Russian and Ukrainian immigrants turn to the institutions when they have absolute needs which they feel helpless to solve.
2. These immigrants do not tend to adopt a position of continued dependence towards the institutional supports; they rather keep a certain level of autonomy and personal initiative in solving their own problems.
3. It is in the institutional solidarities that they find moral and affective support and in this way it is possible to establish friendship and fellowship bonds that go beyond the mere immediate and accidental support, and that transmits a kind of ontological security to the individual himself. Rarely do they look for associations, only after having finished all the other institutions' support.

Conclusions

4. Some of them are living in a dilemma: on the one hand they avoid the closest relationships with their compatriots, because there is a certain mistrust and fear; on the other hand they also find it difficult to come closer to the citizens of the host country. This way they tend to live isolated. For those who already have some relatives here, their loneliness is not so distressing, as the family plays an important role in one's equilibrium and psychological well-being. For the ones that are living here alone without any close relative, this separation constitutes one of the most traumatic experiences.
5. Differently from what happens to other immigrant groups, these associations have not succeeded in becoming a meeting point of sociability, solidarity, leisure, socio-cultural promotion and even social integration and mediation with the involving society.
6. It seems there is a gap between associations and potential members.