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How do online community platforms and associated offline meetings support highly skilled (re-)migration? The case of the Rückkehrerstammtisch in Istanbul

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Abstract

In this article we investigate online community platforms and associated offline meetings that cater to highly skilled (re-)migrants. To do so we draw on a case study of the Rückkehrerstammtisch in Istanbul, which is aimed especially at highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin, who have moved or plan to move from Germany to Turkey. The Rückkehrerstammtisch mainly consists of an online community platform on the professionally oriented social networking site Xing and regular offline community meetings in Istanbul. Based on a mixed-method case study approach using netnography and qualitative interviews, this article shows that the Rückkehrerstammtisch enables highly skilled persons of Turkish origin the access to migration related information and social networks that are often not available through their pre-existing family and friendship networks in Turkey. Our research thus contributes to the debate about social networks within the migration process of highly skilled persons.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel untersuchen wir Online-Community-Plattformen und damit verbundene Offline-Treffen, die sich an hochqualifizierte (Re-)Migranten richten. Dafür analysieren wir den Fall des Rückkehrerstammtisches in Istanbul, der sich insbesondere an hochqualifizierte türkeistämmige Personen richtet, die von Deutschland in die Türkei (re-)migriert sind, oder vorhaben, dies zu tun. Der Rückkehrerstammtisch besteht hauptsächlich aus einer Online-Community-Plattform auf der professionell orientierten sozialen Netzwerkseite *Xing* und regelmäßigen Offline-Treffen in Istanbul. Basierend auf einem Mixed-Methods-Fallstudienansatz, der Netnographie und qualitative Interviews kombiniert, zeigt dieser Beitrag, dass der Rückkehrerstammtisch hochqualifizierten türkeistämmigen (Re-)Migranten Zugang zu migrationsbezogenen Informationen und sozialen Netzwerken ermöglicht, die über ihre bestehenden Familien- und Freundschaftsnetzwerke nicht verfügbar sind. Unsere Forschung trägt zur Debatte über soziale Netzwerke innerhalb des Migrationsprozesses von hochqualifizierten Personen bei.

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1. Introduction

Against the background of economic globalization, highly skilled migrants are receiving increased attention in the scientific discourse. Since the late 1980s, research on highly skilled migrants has developed significantly (*Findlay* and *Cranston* 2015). For the purpose of this article, we define 'highly skilled' as people with a tertiary-level qualification or extensive or equivalent experience in their specific fields (cf. *Iredale* 2001). Highly skilled migration can take various forms with respect to settlement duration (temporary or permanent), migration channels (e.g., internal labor markets of multinational enterprises, companies with international contracts, recruitment agencies) and status (e.g., refugee, immigrant, (re-)migrant). Most studies have conceptualized highly skilled migrants as "high-flying corporate executives and managerial elites" (*Nagel* 2005: 198) even though many highly skilled migrants are not circulating within the corporate networks of multinational enterprises and have to self-organize their migration. In this study, we consider highly skilled migrants in a broader sense by not only including intra-company transferees but also persons who organize their migration individually.

It was long assumed that highly skilled migrants possess the necessary resources, such as social and cultural capital, to successfully manage the migration process and to adapt to a new environment. Thus, there is relatively little knowledge about factors that hinder and facilitate the migration of highly skilled persons (*van Riemsdijk* 2015). While recent studies acknowledged the facilitating role of the local and web-based migrant communities for the immigration of highly skilled persons (e.g., *Beaverstock* 2011; *van Riemsdijk* 2014; *Plöger* and *Becker* 2015), as yet there is no evidence regarding community-based support for highly skilled (re-)migrants. In this article, we investigate the role of online community platforms and associated offline meetings within highly skilled (re-)migration. In particular, we focus on the opportunities for social networking and migration-relevant information gathering that online community platforms and local community meetings provide to highly skilled persons during their pre- and post-migration phase.

Empirically, this article is based on a single case study of the Rückkehrerstammtisch (returnee regulars' table [RS]) in Istanbul. The RS consists of a main online community based on the professionally oriented so-cial networking site *Xing*[1] and regular associated offline meetings in Istanbul. The RS is especially aimed at highly skilled persons of Turkish origin, who have moved or plan to move from Germany to Turkey. Germany and Turkey are connected through longstanding migration relations. With the conclusion of the labor recruitment agreement between Germany and Turkey in 1961, Germany has become the main destination for Turkish migrant workers (*Rieple* 2000: 89). However, in the years 2006 to 2014, for the first time since 1985, more persons of Turkish origin migrated from Germany to Turkey than the other way around (*Alscher* et al. 2014: 108). Many of them are highly skilled (*Sezer* and *Dağlar* 2009).

The article is organized in six sections: in the following two sections we set out the analytical concept (Section 2) and the empirical context of this study (Section 3). After presenting the research methods (Section 4), we explore the role of the RS in the (re-)migration process of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin (Section 5). In the final section, conclusions are drawn.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Migrant networks and information gathering in the (re-)migration process

(Re-)migration describes a process in which people return to their (ancestral) home or country of origin after a long period abroad (*King* 2000). In research, (re-)migration has been gaining importance since the 1960s, mainly as part of the migration-development nexus debate (e.g., *Raghuram* 2007; *Sørensen* et al. 2002). There are many theoretical approaches in migration research to explain and analyze the (re-)migration phenomenon. In the last two decades, a transnational understanding of (re-)migration has proved to be a productive alternative to economically oriented and structuralist approaches (*Carling* and *Erdal* 2014; *Olivier-Mensah* and *Scholl-Schneider* 2016).

Particular importance is being attached to transnational social networks within the (re-)migration process (*Cassarino* 2004). Social networks channel information and other resources that are of importance for every migration process (*Gurak* and *Caces* 1992: 153). It is the social capital of (re-)migrants within their social networks that increases their access to resources and assists them to lower the costs and risks within

the migration process (*Dekker* and *Engbersen* 2014: 402). *Bourdieu* defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (*Bourdieu* 1986: 248).

Studies on migration in general and (re-)migration in particular tend to focus on the social capital provided through family and friendship networks within the migration process (e.g., *Duval* 2004; *Ni Laoire* 2007). These relationships with family members and close friends, which provide emotional and material support, are called 'strong ties'. In contrast, relationships that are characterized by less familiarity are called 'weak ties'. Weak ties are especially helpful for gathering resources and novel and non-redundant information, such as information about job opportunities (*Granovetter* 1973). Thus, weak ties are often more valuable than strong ones for social support within migration processes (*Ye* 2006). Weak ties within migrant communities[2] are seen as an especially important source of information and assistance within the migration process (*Winters* et al. 2001: 161).

2.2 The role of online community platforms and associated offline meetings in facilitating highly skilled (re-)migration

Today migrants have various opportunities to develop and maintain interpersonal ties within their communities. In recent years, the Internet has facilitated the creation of online platforms, often in the form of online groups or forums, which can be seen as infrastructure for social networking and interactions among community members, either geographically dispersed or locally bound (*Schubert* and *Koch* 2003). In general, a distinction can be made between socially (e.g., *Facebook*) and professionally oriented online community platforms (e.g., *Linkedin*). These differ in terms of their purpose and user profiles. While socially oriented platforms mainly provide private information about their members, profiles on professionally oriented platforms provide information about the users' professional life, such as fields of expertise, testimonials and their reputation (*O'Murchu* et al. 2004). The creation of online community platforms can have two possible beneficial effects. On the one hand, already established migrant communities can benefit from the facilitated and extended communication offered by the community platforms. On the other hand,

the creation of community platforms can spark the formation of a community (*Koch* 2002: 21).

Online community platforms – either socially or professionally oriented – give their members the opportunity to set up virtual networks, which lead to an increase in social capital (*Hiller* and *Franz* 2004). Online community platforms allow their members not only access to people with whom they have strong or weak ties, but also to people with whom they have no ties at all (*Dekker* and *Engbergsen* 2014: 404). In other words, online community platforms "can provide the technical means for as-yet-unactivated, latent ties to be activated into weak-tie relationships" (*Haythornthwaite* 2002: 397). Thereby, online community platforms enable time and space independent virtual communication, which is an effective way to spread information within a community (*Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014). However, virtual communication within communities is often accompanied by problems. *Matzat* (2005) emphasizes the 'free rider' problem and the problem of trust. The free rider problem is based on the fact that most community members never produce content or provide assistance to other community members. However, the cost of active participation in group discussions is paid by the active members, while the benefits of the discussion are shared equally between active and passive participants (*Matzat* 2005: 179). Thus, a lack of reciprocity can decrease the interaction within online communities (*Kavanaugh* et al. 2005). The second problem, the problem of trust, arises mainly in the bilateral exchange of information or social support between two members. When a member answers a question or provides assistance to another member, he/she can only hope that in the course of future interaction a role reversal may take place and that he/she will be helped in return for their assistance by their interaction partner (*Matzat* 2005: 179). If a member anticipates that a contribution will never be returned by another member, for example because he/she is leaving the community after getting the information or support needed, bi-directional interaction can be interfered right from the beginning (*Matzat* 2010: 1172).

In many online communities, interaction is not only based on virtual communication but also on local face-to-face contacts, which often complement each other (*Sessions* 2010). Many migrants who participate in online community platforms also often meet in person with other members (*Schrooten* 2010). Offline community meetings mostly "occur in a pre-arranged

location – sometimes routinely scheduled, other times occurring sporadically" (*Sessions* 2010: 378). That means that community meetings take place in very specific locations, which emphasizes the importance of locality and space specificity of highly skilled migrants in destination cities (*Nagel* 2005; *Beaverstock* 2011). Community meetings often provide points of contact for newly arrived and already settled highly skilled migrants within a destination area to exchange information (*Plöger* and *Becker* 2015). The face-to-face communication between community members can reduce uncertainties and engender trust, which helps to develop and strengthen weak ties (*Bathelt* and *Turi* 2011: 522). People are also more likely to exchange help within face-to-face communication than through virtual communication (*Kavanaugh* et al. 2005). *Chen* and *Choi* (2011) found that the higher the availability of offline social support, the less likely migrants are to seek online social support.

Seeing online community platforms and associated offline meetings as interrelated forms of a (re-)migration support infrastructure leads us to three research questions:

1) Why and in which phases of the (re-)migration process do highly skilled persons participate in online community platforms and associated offline meetings?
2) How does participation in online community platforms and associated offline meetings facilitate highly skilled persons to form social networks and collect migration-relevant information within the (re-)migration process?
3) What kinds of social networks are formed and what kind of information is shared on online community platforms and associated offline meetings?

3. Highly skilled (re-)migration from Germany to Turkey

Migration relations between Germany and Turkey have been discussed in politics, public and science for more than 50 years. Initially the scientific debate focused on Turkish workers and their integration in Germany (e.g., *Bartels* 1968; *Fassmann* et al. 1997). However, in the years 2006 to 2014, for the first time since 1985, more people migrated from Germany to Turkey than vice versa (*Alscher* et al. 2014: 109). Consequently increasing attention has been paid to the (re-)migration from Germany to Turkey, especially as

it involves academics of Turkish origin (e.g., *Sezer* and *Dağlar* 2009; *Aydin* 2010). The scale of (re-)migration of highly skilled people of Turkish origin is currently unknown. This has two major causes. First, there is a lack of data on how many students of Turkish origin graduated in Germany. Even though it is known that the number of graduates of Turkish nationality has risen from 1,407 in 2000 to 3,543 in 2015 (see *Table 1*), there is no data available about graduates of Turkish origin with German passports. The statistics only allow a distinction between *Bildungsinlaender* and *Bildungsauslaender*. *Bildungsinlaender* refers to "students of other nationalities who have obtained their higher education entrance qualification in Germany", while *Bildungsauslaender* are "students of other nationalities who have obtained their higher education entrance qualification outside Germany" (*DAAD* and *DZHW* 2018a: n.p.). Second, the level of qualifications is not included within the emigration data of the Federal Republic of Germany (*Hanewinkel* 2012). There is also only little information about the (re-)migrants' destinations in Turkey. It is estimated that Istanbul is the primary destination point for highly skilled (re-)migrants next to Izmir, Bursa, and Ankara (*Sezer* and *Dağlar* 2009; *von Einem* 2016).

Table 1   Outline of German university graduates of Turkish nationality. Source: own elaboration based on data from DAAD and DZHW 2018b: n.p

Year	Graduates of Turkish nationality	Bildungs-auslaender	Bildungs-inlaender
2000	1,407	419	988
2005	2,069	728	1,341
2010	2,351	866	1,485
2015	3,543	874	2,669

At the center of interest in the public and scientific discourse about highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin are persons who acquired their higher education entrance qualification in Germany and who are usually part of the second and third migration generation of Turks in Germany. Most studies have focused on the (re-)migration motives of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin. So far, *Sezer* and *Dağlar* (2009) have conducted the largest quantitative study on the phenomenon of (re-)migration of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin. They state that the major factors relevant to the decision to (re-)migrate are a lack of sense of 'home' in Germany, job related reasons, economic reasons and family related reasons (*Sezer* and *Dağlar* 2009: 17). Findings from qualitative studies

confirm the importance of economic and job related motives for (re-)migration decisions of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin (e.g., *Hanewinkel* 2010; *Sievers* et al. 2010; *Pusch* and *Aydin* 2012). Turkey can be regarded as an emerging economy (*IMF* 2013), which has had a robust growth in recent years. After the economic global crisis in 2008-2009, the country experienced significant growth rates despite adverse circumstances (*OECD* 2016). Since the change of government in 2002, Turkey has also developed toward an important destination country for foreign direct investment (FDI). Between 2005 and 2015, the FDI volume increased to 161 billion USD (*MoE* 2016: 10). Investors from Germany are one of the main holders of inward FDI stocks in Turkey (*GTAI* 2017). More than 6800 German companies respectively Turkish companies with equity investments from Germany are registered in Turkey (*Federal Foreign Office Germany* 2017: n. p.). Overall, the ongoing economic growth and the large number of German companies can be seen as important pull factors for highly skilled persons of Turkish origin to (re-)migrate to Turkey.

Studies that focus on social networks within the (re-) migration process of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin are rare. The studies show that kinship networks influence the decision to (re-)migrate and are important to overcome problems in daily life, such as finding appropriate accommodation and getting information about bureaucratic issues, but that they are often rather unhelpful in providing highly skilled persons of Turkish origin with career-related information and support for their integration into the Turkish labor market (e.g., *Pusch* and *Aydin* 2012; *Aydin* 2013). A frequently mentioned example in the literature regarding where highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin from Germany potentially build social networks outside their family and friendship networks is the RS in Istanbul (e.g., *Hanewinkel* 2010; *Aydin* 2013). In Section 5 we will elaborate on the role of the RS within the (re-)migration of highly skilled persons of Turkish origin. First, the following section will highlight the research methodology.

4. Research methods

The research design of this article follows a single mixed-method case study approach (*Yin* 2014). To analyze the community platform RS, we used two methods of observation: netnography and qualitative interviews.

Firstly, we accessed the main online community platform of the RS, which is based on the social network site *Xing,* using a netnographic approach (*Garcia* et al. 2009; *Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014). The aim of the netnographic approach is to gather data by direct participation within communities to analyze practices and interactions while they are being performed (*Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014). The available data for such participant observations can include e-mails, chat room entries, instant messages and comments (*Garcia* et al. 2009). The approach adapts ethnographic research techniques to study phenomena emerging through computer-mediated communications (*Kozinets* 1998). The analyzed RS online community platform on *Xing* has existed since May 2007 and consists of 1,675 participants (in October 2017). To analyze the interaction within the online platform, we subscribed to the Rückkehrerstammtisch group on *Xing* as ordinary members. As a result of the immense volume of data, we were obliged to analyze the online community platform of the RS selectively. As a first step, we analyzed data of a representative amount of 1,000 personal profiles to characterize the participation structure of the online community platform. The selection of the 1,000 profiles was fully randomized without any pre-selection of the sample. We used the personal profile data from *Xing* because there is no official data available about RS participants and because *Xing* enables the analysis of professional and private data of the members' personal profiles, such as gender, curriculum vitae, and place of employment. In a second step, we analyzed data of all forum entries (386) that had been posted from January 2010 to December 2015 and of all RS meetings (86) that had taken place from September 2007 to September 2017. The data allowed us a qualitative investigation of the online interaction of RS participants. We developed codes for distinct content types of the post by using deductively predefined categories based on our conceptual framework and inductively by the establishment of new categories.

Secondly, we conducted 13 qualitative interviews between 2015 and 2016. These included one expert interview with the founder and current organizer of the RS and twelve interviews with participants of the RS. The selection process of the interview partners was structured by the information gained from the 1,000 profiles. For the selection process, we excluded all persons who were not covered under our definition of highly skilled. From the remaining 545 people we randomly contacted 95 via the private messaging

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function of the *Xing* online platform and twelve persons agreed to the interview request (response rate of 12.6 %). Generally, the interviews lasted 40 to 70 minutes and were digitally recorded, and subsequently transcribed and coded for qualitative content analysis (*Mayring* 2000), using *Maxqda*. The text coding focused on migration related information gathering about the destination, individual problems, and problem-solving strategies within the (re-)migration process and network building and maintenance through the RS. All of the interviews were conducted in German. Quotes have been translated from German into English for the purpose of this paper. The approach for qualitative interviews proved helpful to triangulate evidence from the netnographic analysis of the RS online community platform and to explore the conditions and support mechanisms of the community meetings.

Five major observations can be reported concerning the personal characteristics of these interview partners (see *Table 2*). First, half of the interview partners were women. Second, all interview partners acquired their higher education entrance qualification and their highest educational degree in Germany. Third, a majority of ten interview partners (re-)migrated to Turkey. Two interview partners were preparing for their migration to Turkey at the time of the interview. Fourth, of the interview partners who (re-)migrated to Turkey, only one person returned to Turkey as their country of origin. The rest migrated to Turkey as their ancestral country of origin. Fifth, two of the interview partners who (re-)migrated to Turkey were intra-company transferees, while the remainder organized their migration independently from companies and organizations.

Table 2   Outline of the interviews with participants of the RS. Source: authors' fieldwork

ID	Sex	Academic education	Highest educational degree	Educational institution	Occupation	Year of (re-) migration	Location after (re-) migration
1	male	Engineering	Bachelor	Academy of Data Processing, Boeblingen	Head of consulting	2014	Istanbul
2	male	Commerce	Bachelor	Cooperative State University, Villingen-Schwenningen	Manager	2008	Istanbul
3	female	Architecture	Diploma	Leibniz University Hannover	Architect	2014	Istanbul
4	male	Commerce	Diploma	Paderborn University	Sales director	2008	Istanbul
5	female	Economics	Bachelor	University of Hagen	Manager	2015	Istanbul
6	male	Business Informatics	Diploma	University of Applied Sciences, Giessen	Manager	2012	Istanbul
7	female	Sociology	PhD	Eberhard Karls University, Tuebingen	Research fellow	2015	Istanbul
8	female	Business Administration	Bachelor	Heidelberg International Business Academy	Sales and Marketing	2011	Istanbul
9	female	Communication and History	Bachelor	University of the Arts, Berlin	Freelancer	2013	Istanbul
10	male	Law	Bachelor	University Hamburg	Finance consultant	not yet (re-) migrated	/
11	female	Commerce	Diploma	University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hildesheim	Assistant manager	2009	Istanbul
12	male	Finance	Postgraduate studies*	Academy of Banking, Hamburg	Bank manager	not yet (re-) migrated	/

*Interview partner 12 attained postgraduate professional education and holds an associate degree in finance.

5. The role of the Rückkehrerstammtisch in highly skilled (re-)migration from Germany to Turkey

5.1 Emergence and structure of the RS

The RS is a self-organized community platform founded by three highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin in Istanbul in 2006. The primary objective is to facilitate the (re-)migration process of people of Turkish origin from Germany to Turkey by offering easy and informal access to community-based support. The RS is not an official association or organization and consequently has no membership fee, no paid staff, is not bound to any official procedures such as general assemblies and has no political representation pretense (interview with founder). Basically, the RS consists of two online community platforms and associated regular offline meetings in Istanbul (see *Fig. 1*).
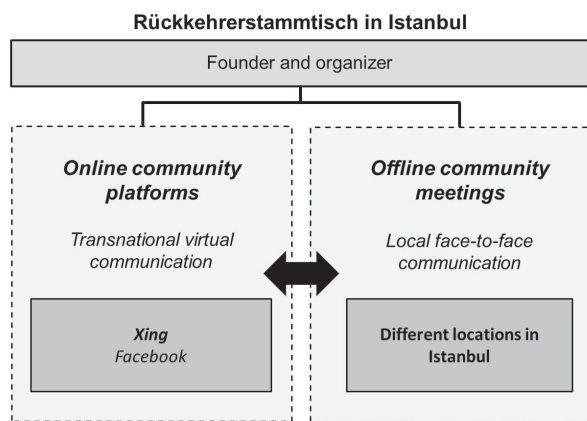

Fig. 1   Structure of the RS in Istanbul. Source: own elaboration based on authors' fieldwork

The regular offline community meetings are held, on average, nine times a year in Istanbul. The types of the meetings vary to suit the different needs of the members (interview with founder). Beside group trips, readings and festivities, network meetings and expert talks are the most common forms of community meetings. Overall, the specific location varies depending on the occasion. While the meetings are mostly held in cafes, restaurants and bars across Beyoğlu, a central district of Istanbul, the group trips and festivities take place in different areas of Istanbul (see *Fig. 2*).

The virtual communication of the RS started with a mailing list containing the participants of the local meetings. In 2007, the two online community platforms on *Facebook* and *Xing* were created. However, since the Gezi-Park protests in May 2013, the open

community platform on *Facebook* has been converted into a private group due to security issues. This has led to the community platform on *Xing* becoming the main virtual communication channel of the *RS*. The content on the community platform on *Xing* is organized on a forum, which is structured with the following subcategories: about life in Turkey; personal introductions; employment market; news; meeting announcements; and other unspecific topics.

The online platforms and offline meetings are important community-building tools (*Koch* 2002). What links people together in this (re-)migrant community is their common sense of belonging and social identity in their (ancestral) country of origin, even though many people have never personally interacted with each other (cf. *Wellman* 2005).

5.2 Participation and use of the RS

Since the first meeting in Istanbul with 12 persons in 2006, the average number of meeting attendees has rapidly increased to about 90 participants per meeting. The number of participants of the online platforms on *Facebook* and *Xing* has increased significantly since 2007 and reached approximately 4,000 people in 2015. Overall, the majority of the people participating in the RS community meetings and online platform on *Xing* have a Turkish background[3] (interview with founder, *Xing* data).

To understand the participation structure of the online community, we analyzed a representative amount of 1,000 personal profiles of the RS online platform on *Xing*. The majority of the surveyed participants were men (58.8 %). Most have a university degree and can be categorized as highly skilled (54.5 %). Moreover, most participants were multi-lingual (80.4 %) and had gained work experience in Germany (66.0 %). The minority of the participants was located in Turkey (38.4 %), with the majority located in Germany (51.4 %). This indicates that a small percentage of the participants had (re-)migrated to Turkey and it emphasizes the transnational character of the RS online community. Participants located in Turkey were mostly living in Istanbul (77.7 %) and were employed in Turkish companies (66.9 %). The analysis also illustrates the relative importance of German companies as employers for highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin (cf. *Müller* 2017), as almost a fifth of the participants (19.7 %) located in Turkey were working for German companies.
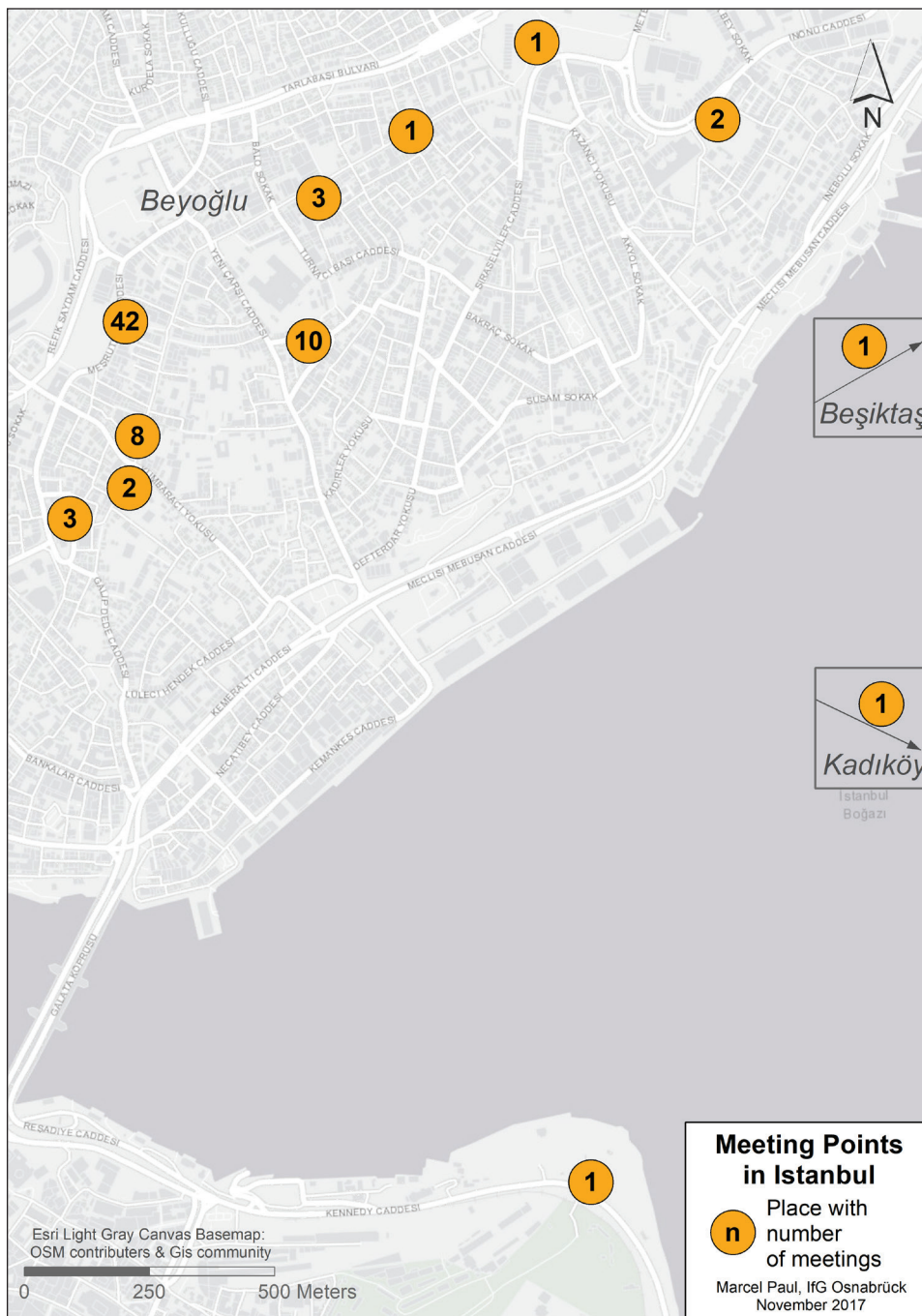
Fig. 2   Locations of community meetings of the RS in Istanbul. Source: authors' fieldwork

Most interview partners stated that they used the RS online community platform and the offline community meetings in different phases of the (re-)migration process. The *Xing* online platform is mostly used in the pre-migration phase to gather information about the economic and career related conditions in Turkey and to make contact with persons who had already (re-)migrated to Turkey. The following quote provides the intention of one interview partner to use the *Xing* online platform to prepare for (re-)migration:

I was hoping to get some specific information. What possibilities do we have here and, above all, how does this have a monetary impact? I have always heard that with the four languages I speak I can almost choose any job in Turkey, because it is a scarce commodity in Turkey. My hope was to find out through the community what concrete possibilities there are. (Interview, participant #10, Hamburg, 2016)

In the post-migration phase, however, most interview partners stated that they only used the *Xing* online platform for organizational purpose, mostly to access information about the offline community meetings. This illustrates the supporting role of virtual communication in the development of place-based community interactions (*Hiller* and *Franz* 2004). Overall, however, the *Xing* online platform is used for transnational rather than local interactions. This finding is in line with *Chen* and *Choi* (2011) who observed that the availability of social offline support reduces the demand for social online support of migrants.

The offline community meetings in Istanbul are mainly attended by people of Turkish origin who have already (re-)migrated to Turkey. Many interview partners stated that their main motivation for participating in offline community meetings was to make contact with other highly skilled (re-)migrants in Istanbul to gather specific information. One interviewer reported:

> It is a place to answer your questions and to discuss your problems. This is important for me. When I came here, I did not know anyone who I could ask for support regarding my questions and concerns. In the beginning, the questions were of a more professional nature because you are looking for a job. When you have overcome this hurdle, then the other questions step into the fore. (Interview, participant #03, Istanbul, 2015)

This quotation shows that many highly skilled (re-)migrants are not embedded within social networks which can provide them with the necessary information and resources for local adaptation after their arrival in Istanbul. Parallel to *Pusch* and *Aydin* (2012), our data reveals that, even though many highly skilled (re-)migrants have kinship networks in Turkey, they usually play only a minor role when it comes to the support of their professional goals and careers. Thus, for many highly skilled (re-)migrants it is very important to establish ties with persons outside their family and friendship networks in order to gain access to professionally oriented information and other resources as the founder of the RS explains:

> Especially for the newcomers, it is very important to meet new people because the relatives they have in Turkey cannot directly offer them these social networks because they live in different worlds and are differently socialized. And

often they do not have economic networks either. (Interview, founder, Istanbul, 2015)

In the following, we examine how the RS enables highly skilled persons to form social networks and gather migration-relevant information within the (re-)migration process. We present our empirical findings structured along the two specific settings of interactions within the RS: the *Xing* online community platform and the regular offline community meetings.

5.3 Social networking and information gathering facilitated by the RS

The Xing online community platform

The RS online community platform on *Xing* offers their members time and place independent access to information via the forum as well as the opportunity for bilateral communication with participants via personal messages. Both forms of communication can be characterized by asynchronicity, as threads and messages on the platform are stored over years and allow for long response times. This possibility for delayed responses fosters the development of quality content as it enables information triangulation by consulting other sources (*Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014). Many interview partners stated that they profit from the online forum as an open source for first information about the economic conditions and potential career prospects in Turkey. However, only a small subset of the community participants (about 9.0 %) actively produces content on the forum, while most of the participants only passively consume information. The majority can be described as passive participants, or so-called free riders (*Matzat* 2005). The analysis of the forum entries reveals that the most produced content falls into the following two categories:

1. *Career opportunities*: This includes job offers and job requests. The RS online forum on *Xing* is one of the largest job exchanges for positions in Turkey with a focus on highly skilled persons of Turkish origin. Between 2010 and 2015 nearly one fifth (17.9 %) of all posts were job advertisements. In the case of job requests, authors seek targeted support from other members to find a job in Turkey. These requests are always connected with a personal introduction. The following quotation is exemplary for many highly qualified people of Turkish origin who do not have access to professional networks in Turkey:

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Hello, everybody, […]. I am a lawyer/consultant and I am looking for a new challenge and therefore I wanted to look for a job in Turkey. However, since there is also a lack of consulting positions for German lawyers in Turkey, I have a request for this *Rückkehrerstammtisch*. Since I do not have a large network in Turkey, I wanted to know if you could tell me about Turkish headhunters who operate internationally. Also, any other practical help to facilitate access to this labor market would be very nice. Thank you very much in advance! (RS forum, post # 331)

Additionally, most interview partners, with exception of the two intra-company transferees, stated that it was very important to inform themselves about career opportunities in Turkey via the RS online forum on *Xing* during the pre-migration phase.

2. *Experiences of (re-)migrants in Istanbul and across Turkey*: This comprises a broad range of requests and discussions about the experiences of (re-)migrants in Turkey, such as accommodation and job related income or insurance issues. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

Hello dear members, I am interested in how those (with German citizenship), who came from Germany to Turkey to work, have regulated health insurance? […] I am happy about many informative answers. (RS forum, post # 77)

On the other hand, many interview partners argued that they also used the possibility of bilateral exchange outside the general forum with selected community members to make contact with persons who already (re-)migrated to Turkey. Possible contact persons are latently available through the structure of the online platform.

I have also occasionally written to people actively. If I have seen in their CV, see that they were also born here, studied here, worked here. I asked them about their experiences, asked them directly how the step came about or how this job came about. (Interview, participant #12, Hamburg, 2016)

An interview partner who is working for a German company in Istanbul reported that she gets regular personal messages from other forum participants she does not know, asking about her (re-)migration experiences and vacancies in her company.

I also get messages on *Xing* myself asking if there are any vacancies in my company. Also, people ask if their children should study in Istanbul. They want to know if that better or not? Always such questions, I always get those on *Xing*. (Interview, participant #11, Istanbul, 2015)

These quotations underline that participants on the community platform actively try to establish new weak ties to persons who are already in Turkey to gain migration related information. Some interview partners indicate that the newly established ties to so-called 'pioneers' (*Dekker* and *Engbergsen* 2014) in Turkey gave them access to valuable information about migrating to and living in Turkey. In some cases, they also offered direct assistance as one interviewee reports:

Concretely, there are two people with whom I still have contact, who messaged me and took their time to write a lot and also presented my curriculum vitae to their own personnel manager [in Turkey]. (Interview, participant # 12, Hamburg, 2016)

However, even though we found that bilateral exchange can enable access to information and assistance, many interview partners reported that direct inquiries are answered infrequently and only with a superficial level of information. This can be explained by the problem of trust within bilateral communication of online community members (*Matzat* 2005). On a more general level, a downside of bilateral interaction within the *Xing* online community platform is that it reduces the general cumulative learning advantage of the online community, as bilateral discussion contents are not available for all online community members (*Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014).

The regular offline community meetings

The regular offline community meetings offer their members a local platform to get to know other highly skilled persons of Turkish origin and to gather information to resolve specific problems, such as dealing with bureaucratic issues and finding an appropriate job. Migration related information gathering at offline community meetings is mainly provided through group discussions, bilateral discussions between participants, and expert talks. At expert talks, guest speakers from the fields of media, science, politics, diplomatic service, and economics hold lectures and answer questions.

Regardless of the overall topic of the meeting, network building between the participants is one of the main goals of the community meetings. While the virtual platform of the RS is especially used to create transnational ties between participants in Germany and Turkey, the RS gatherings in Istanbul enable highly skilled (re-)migrants to build localized social and professional ties. The regular community meetings offer the opportunity to meet other (re-)migrants with a comparable career and background, to speak German, and to exchange information and share experiences that promote the establishment of friendships.

I have been able to observe this for many years: the people attending became friends with each other and establish their social networks through the local meetings. Ninety-nine percent spend their free time with friends who have a German background as well. (Interview, founder, Istanbul, 2015)

This quotation shows that, in many cases, established weak ties between participants of the community meetings become strong ties. The maintenance and strengthening of ties is done primarily through discussions and meetings outside the community meetings. Virtual communication plays an important role therein, but on instant messenger and phone calls rather than on the *Xing* community platform.

The development of relationships does not only take place in the social sphere, but also involves the professional sphere. Professional networking, especially among highly skilled (re-)migrants, takes place through the exchange of business cards and job-related discussions. This is illustrated by the following two quotes from participants of the offline community meetings:

And what happens very often is contact exchange: networking. [...] Let us put it this way: if I need a notary I know someone through the Rückkehrerstammtisch. If I need a lawyer I know someone through the Rückkehrerstammtisch. You always exchange business cards and this is how you build [...] a network, which is extremely important here in Istanbul, and can support your personal success. (Interview, participant #8, Istanbul, 2015)

Yes, participants handed out business cards. Anyone who had anything to offer has made it known. (Interview, participant #5, Istanbul, 2015)

This illustrates the important role of face-to-face contacts to engender trust, which helps to develop and strengthen weak ties (*Bathelt* and *Turi* 2011). The founder of the RS plays a particularly important role in facilitating the professional networking of highly skilled (re-)migrants of Turkish origin. She invites guest speakers for the community meetings not only to convey content but also to foster the network building of the RS participants outside of the (re-)migrant community. One interview partner reported that executives of Turkish companies were invited to one meeting and that they drew attention to potential job opportunities for highly skilled (re-)migrants in their companies.

There were, for example, Turkish companies that were looking for German returnees as employees. I got so many business cards that night. (Interview, participant #5, Istanbul, 2015)

Moreover, the founder of the RS also actively assists participants in finding a job suitable to their specific set of skills and their professional vita. To do this she uses her wide network of decision-makers in the fields of politics, business and culture. The following quotation illustrates the broker function of the RS founder within the (re-)migrant community:

Many are also looking for jobs when they come here [to the regulars' table]. I secured jobs for several people because I am a person who always gets those job offers. They tell me: 'we are looking for someone, do you know anyone?' There was a woman the other day that was studying mathematics. She has been looking for a job for a really long time and she finally found a job through the regulars' table. (Interview, founder, Istanbul, 2015).

These findings show that especially the participation at RS community meetings in Istanbul can lead to career advancement opportunities and economic upward mobility for highly skilled (re-)migrants in Turkey. This is of particular benefit to highly skilled persons of Turkish origin who organize their (re-)migration independently from companies and organizations.

6.   Conclusion

With this article, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the factors and mechanisms that support the (re-)migration of highly skilled persons. While many studies conceptualize highly skilled migration as "high-flying corporate executives and managerial elites" (*Nagel* 2005: 198), we considered highly skilled migrants in a broader sense. This takes into account that many highly skilled migrants are not circulating within the corporate networks of multinational enterprises, but have to self-organize the entire migration process. In particular, the main aim of the article was to examine the opportunities for social networking and the gathering of migration-relevant information that online community platforms and local community meetings provide to highly skilled (re-)migrants during their pre- and post-migration phase. For this purpose, we drew upon a case study of the Rückkehrerstammtisch (RS) in Istanbul, which is aimed especially at highly skilled persons of Turkish origin who have moved or plan to move from Germany to Turkey.

We were able to show that community members use the RS online platform and the associated offline meetings during different phases of the (re-)migration process. While the online community platform of the RS is mostly used to prepare for (re-)migration within the pre-migration phase, the availability of regular RS community meetings in Istanbul reduces the demand for support through the RS online community platform during the post-migration phase. Our findings further demonstrate that the RS enables highly skilled persons of Turkish origin the access to migration related information and social networks which are often not available through their pre-existing family and friendship networks in Turkey.

The time- and space-independent online community platform, which consists of an online forum and a bilateral communication tool, turned out to be an important open source to gain initial information about the economic conditions and potential career prospects in Turkey. Moreover, it enables the establishment of new weak ties to participants who are already in Turkey through bilateral communication. Transnational ties to so called 'pioneers' (*Dekker* and *Engbergsen* 2014) in Turkey give highly skilled (re-)migrants access to valuable information about migrating to and living in Turkey, and in some cases, also to direct assistance during the (re-)migration process. In general, these forms of direct exchange enable (re-)migrants to gather highly specific information suitable to their individual needs. The asynchronous online interactions foster the development of quality content as it facilitates information triangulation (*Grabher* and *Ibert* 2014).

The regular RS community meetings enable highly skilled (re-)migrants to gather information and build localized social networks to resolve specific problems after their arrival, such as dealing with bureaucratic issues or finding an appropriate job. Above all, it is the weak ties that highly skilled (re-)migrants establish at RS community meetings that can lead to career advancement opportunities and economic upward mobility in Turkey. The importance of regular RS community meetings in Istanbul, where (re-)migrants build up social networks and gather information, underlines the locality and space specificity of highly skilled migrants in destination cities (*Nagel* 2005; *Beaverstock* 2011). The findings also indicate that, in many cases, established weak ties between participants of the community meetings become strong ties. The strengthening of ties is done primarily through discussions and meetings outside of the community meetings. Especially face-to-face contact between community members reduces uncertainties and engenders trust, which helps to transform weak ties into strong ties (*Bathelt* and *Turi* 2011).

Furthermore, the study revealed the thus far neglected relevance of career focused support for highly skilled (re-)migrants. The RS offers access to professional information, such as information about job opportunities, as well as the opportunity to establish professional relationships. With its professional focus, the RS goes far beyond the support offered through family and friendship networks and 'traditional' migrant organizations, such as providing general assistance within the migration process and being the initial contact point for newly arrived (re-)migrants (e.g. *Cordero-Guzmán* 2005; *Moya* 2005; *Ni Laoire* 2007). Our findings show that highly skilled persons of Turkish origin who self-organized their (re-)migration to Turkey benefit greatly from support they receive from the RS on professional issues, which facilitates their economic upward mobility.

Our article contributes to the debate about social networks in the migration process of highly skilled persons and emphasizes that online community platforms and associated offline meetings are interrelated forms of a (re-)migrant support infrastructure.

This study, however, is explorative and based only on one case. Therefore, the results offer limited scope for generalization. Future research should collect further empirical data and investigate additional cases. A comparison of online community platforms and associated offline meetings across different states and cities would greatly enhance our understanding of community-based (re-)migration support.

Note

[1]*Xing* is a social networking website for professionals, which offers to display personal profiles and the possibility to take part in groups and discussion forums.

[2]Our understanding of communities is in line with *Wellman* (2005: 53) who argues that "[c]ommunities are networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity."

[3]There are no statistics available from the RS on the origins or migration background of the participants. Therefore we rely on the statements made by the founder and on the data gathered from *Xing*. During the interview, the founder of the RS assumed that most of the participants of the RS community meetings in Istanbul belong to the second or third generation of migrants of Turkish origin from Germany. For the RS online platform on *Xing,* through an analysis of participants' first names, we were able to ascertain that the majority have a Turkish background. The analysis of first names of 1,000 participants' profiles shows that the most common language of origin is Turkish (683). Other common languages of origin for first names were Arabic (75), German (59) and Kurdish (11). To analyze the first names language of origin we utilized the database available on "Vorname.com".

Acknowledgements

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