

The Economic Crisis as a Feedback Generating Mechanism? Brazilian, Ukrainian and Moroccan Migration to Portugal¹

Maria Lucinda Fonseca*

ARTICLE

Migration researchers have demonstrated the central function that feedback plays in the perpetuation of migration flows between a specific origin and destination region (Massey *et al.*, 1998; de Haas, 2010; Mabogunje, 1970). Feedback mechanisms are the changes in the constituting elements, for example organisations, strategies or flows of people, which are fed back into the migration system, regulating its functions (Bakewell, 2014). Thus, the system's behaviour is modified by the information that is incorporated back by the actors, nurturing, or not, the continuation of the migration process due to its impact both in the areas of origin and reception (Mabogunje, 1970; Massey *et al.*, 1998; Bilsborrow and Zlotnik, 1995). The literature has pointed to the central role of migrant networks in transmitting feedback.

The positive impact of feedback results in what Massey *et al.* (1998) refer to as cumulative causation (Massey, 1990; Fussell, and Massey, 2004) and the expansion of migration systems. The flip side of these network mechanisms is the potential role that negative feedback might play in contributing to declining migration flows along specific migration corridors (de Haas, 2010; Engbersen *et al.*, 2013). In this paper, while acknowledging the importance of other forms of feedback beyond the network, we focus on the role of migrant networks as a transmissive vehicle. We explore how factors at the macro level influence the content of direct informational feedback. In particular, we are concerned with the content of feedback that has developed in the context of the economic crisis in Portugal. Our focus on one destination, at the height of a severe economic crisis, and three origins permits us to hold constant macro factors in the destination and explore the inner workings of migrant networks and feedback mechanisms affecting two different flows.

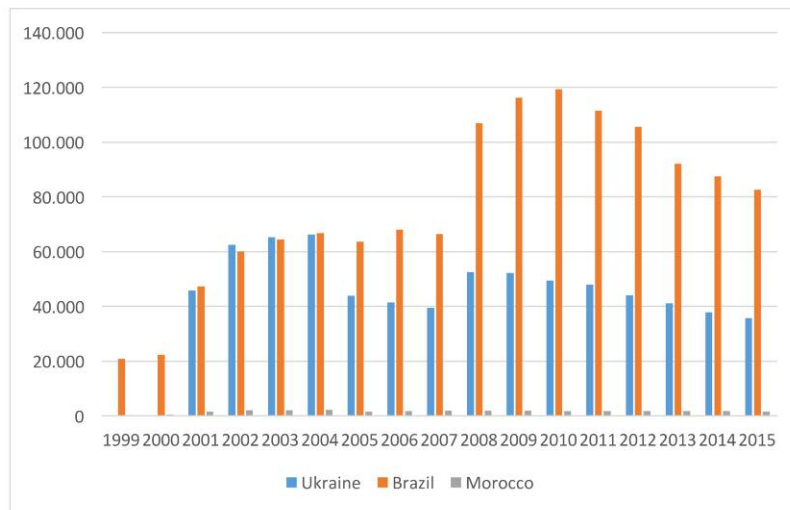
Migration from Brazil and Ukraine to Portugal increased rapidly during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both flows are distinct: while past colonial ties and linguistic and cultural links connect Brazil to Portugal, allowing for a continuous presence of Brazilians in the country, these historical connections are absent in the case of Ukraine. Indeed, the inflows from Ukraine to Portugal relate to shifting social and economic realities in the origin and destination and strong network dynamics (Fonseca, Pereira and Esteves, 2014). The dimension of the flows was such that Brazilians and Ukrainians became the two largest foreign nationalities present

* IGOT – Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território, Universidade de Lisboa

¹ This paper is largely based on a book chapter co-authored by Maria Lucinda Fonseca, Alina Esteves and Jennifer McGarrigle (2017) - "The economic crisis as a generator feedback mechanism: Brazilian and Ukrainian Migration to Portugal", in: Bakewell, O. Engbersen, G. Fonseca, M.L. Horst, C., *Beyond networks. Feedback in international migration*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 113-133.

in Portugal. Since then, there has been a stabilisation and a recent decline of the flow (Fig. 1). While the economic crisis has created impetus to return or migrate onwards to new destinations, there have also been changes in the characteristics of both stock and flows, with demographic consolidation due to family reunification among Ukrainians, and new student migrants from Brazil. Moroccans are a recent and very small immigrant group. However, the number recorded by SEF (1,681 in 2015) may be substantially lower than the real number of Moroccan immigrants in the country. In fact, there are estimates that point to four to five thousand Moroccan immigrants in Portugal, due to the fact that some Moroccans are occasional immigrants, mostly peddlers that come to Portugal from Spain or Italy (or other countries) during the summer months (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - Stock of documented Brazilian, Ukrainian and Moroccan citizens residing in Portugal (1999-2015)



Source: Aliens and Borders Office.

This paper examines the role that negative feedback mechanisms have played in recent migration dynamics in Portugal, namely declining and return migration. It uses a subset of the data from the THEMIS² project: the survey of 400 Brazilians and 306 Ukrainians residing in Portugal and 207 Moroccan migrants residing in the Algarve (2012); and 92 in-depth interviews conducted with Ukrainian, Brazilian and Moroccan immigrants and key informants conducted in Portugal.

Perception of the Macro-Economic Conditions: Return and Transmission of Negative Feedback

The transmission of negative feedback can have a deterrent effect on other potential migrants from the country or region of origin, leading to the decline of migratory flows (Engbersen *et*

² THEMIS project: Theorizing the Evolution of European Migration Systems (a four-year project - 2010–2013, funded by NORFACE transnational research programme on Migration in Europe).

al., 2013; Fonseca, Pereira and Esteves, 2014). However, the experiences of migrants in a given destination are relayed to potential migrants through various different media in addition to the network.

Return migration

The high intensity of return migration was clearly confirmed by the results of the THEMIS survey conducted on the three case-study groups. In fact, 97% of Brazilian respondents and 84.3% of Ukrainians and 51.2% of Moroccans admitted they knew immigrants from their home countries who had previously lived in Portugal and since left the country.

News of the Portuguese economic crisis and the austerity measures implemented in 2011 also reached the origin countries of the main immigrant groups established in Portugal. While the media played a role, informal information networks established between family, friends and acquaintances also transmitted negative feedback. The respondents' narratives have also shown how limited economic opportunities in the destination country are often cited as a major reason for return migration.

The central position that the worsening situation of the Portuguese economy has assumed in informing migration decisions by the three migrant groups is observable in the survey data. Around 50% of Ukrainian respondents and more than 55% of Moroccan and Brazilians respondents disagree with the statement, "in Portugal there are good economic opportunities." Still, significant proportions continue to affirm that there are good economic opportunities in Portugal (Table 1).

Table 1 - Perception of the macro-economic conditions: "In Portugal there are good economic opportunities"

	Brazil		Morocco		Ukraine	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agree	159	39.8	88	42.5	127	41.5
Disagree	238	59.5	117	56.5	151	49.3
Don't know	2	0.5	2	1.0	28	9.2
Interviewer errors and questions not asked	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	400	100.0	207	100.0	306	100.0

Source: destination-country survey data, 2012, THEMIS.

Feedback

In line with their general perception of economic opportunities in Portugal, according to THEMIS survey data, most of the Brazilian, Moroccan and Ukrainian respondents would not recommend moving to Portugal to other co-nationals.

The lack of economic opportunities also has an impact on the capacity of settled migrants to provide assistance to new migrants as the results of the survey data illustrate (Table 2).

Table 2 - Assistance: if anyone were to ask you to provide assistance today ... would you always try to help, never help, or help in some cases but not always?

	Brazil	Morocco	Ukraine
Always try to help	22.3%	39.1%	38.9%
Never help	16.0%	24.2%	14.1%
Help in some cases but not always	61.8%	36.7%	47.1%
Total absolute numbers	400	207	306

Source: destination-country survey data, 2012, THEMIS.

Informational feedback also reflects differences in expectations of the two groups based on their assessment of the conditions in their origin country (Table 3)

Table 3 - Opinion on migration: in Brazil / Morocco / Ukraine, there are good economic opportunities

	Brazil		Morocco		Ukraine	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agree	302	75.5	129	62.3	59	19.3
Disagree	94	23.5	69	33.3	228	74.5
Don't know	4	1.0	9	4.3	19	6.2
Total	400	100.0	207	100.0	306	100.0

Source: destination-country survey data, 2012, THEMIS.

As previously noted, most respondents of the three groups would not recommend migrating to Portugal. However, there is a clear difference evident in the THEMIS data between “not recommending” and actually having discouraged someone from moving to Portugal. Certainly, only 42% of Brazilians, 23% of Moroccans and 21% of Ukrainians surveyed had ever discouraged someone from their respective countries of origin from immigrating to Portugal. While economic concerns dominate informational feedback among Brazilians and Moroccans, Ukrainians consider other factors in evaluating the benefits of migrating to and living in Portugal.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

After several years of economic growth and labour market expansion that attracted foreign workers from a wide range of countries, the migrant communities living in Portugal were confronted with a shrinking labour market, escalating unemployment rates, wage cuts and enterprise bankruptcy. Keeping this context in mind, this paper sought to analyse the nature

of feedback sent to the home country by Brazilian and Ukrainian nationals living in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and Moroccans residing in the Algarve. By focusing on three origins, we were able to compare the explanatory factors for sending negative feedback through personal networks in these two different corridors.

Among the interviewees of the three case-study immigrant groups, the perception of the worsening of macro-economic conditions predominates. Through the qualitative data, in particular, it is apparent that unemployment, precarious working conditions and a lack of professional mobility result in negative perceptions of Portugal and future opportunities. The evaluation of structural factors in Portugal, not necessarily linked with settled migrants' own experiences, interacts with the perception of opportunities in the country of origin to determine the nature of feedback fed into the migration system.

While the qualitative and quantitative data point to the significance of the economic crisis in Portugal in shaping the content of informational feedback sent through personal networks, we also showed the continued consideration of other non-economic factors. In the case of some Ukrainians, quality of life considerations, such as political stability, freedoms and welfare, were reasons for continuing to encourage migration even in the current economic climate. To understand the process, it is also important to take account of the activity status of migrants; for example, we find that feedback remains positive in the case of Brazilian students, regardless of the economic crisis, but reflecting global trends in international student migration. Thus, our understanding of how feedback is developed through personal networks in the context of economic downturn depends on a complex interplay between individual characteristics and structural circumstances in the country of origin and destination.

References

BAKEWELL, O. (2014) "Relaunching Migration Systems", *Migration Studies*, 2(3), pp. 300-318.

BILSBORROW, R. and ZLOTNIK, H. (1995) "The systems approach and the measurement of the determinants of international migration", in van der Erf, R. and Heering, L. (eds.) *Causes of international migration. Proceedings of a workshop*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, pp. 61-76.

DE HAAS, H. (2010) "The internal dynamics of migration processes: a theoretical inquiry", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), pp. 1587-1617.

ENGBERSEN, G.; SNEL E. and VAN MEETEREN, M. (2013) *Declining migration from Morocco to the Netherlands and the diminutive causation of migration*, IMI Working Papers Series, No. 73. Oxford: University of Oxford.

FONSECA, M.F.; PEREIRA, S. and ESTEVES, A. (2014) "Migration of Ukrainian nationals to Portugal: Changing flows and the critical role of social networks", *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 3(1), pp. 115-130.

FUSSELL, E. and MASSEY, D. (2004) "The limits to cumulative causation: International migration from Mexican urban areas", *Demography*, 41(1), pp. 151-171.

MABOGUNJE, A.L. (1970) "Systems approach to a theory of rural-urban migration", *Geographical Analysis*, 2(1), pp. 1-18.

MASSEY, D.; ARANGO, J.; HUGO, G.; KOUAOUCI, A. PELLEGRINO, A. and TAYLOR, J.E. (1998) *Worlds in Motion: International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MASSEY, D.S. (1990) "Social structure, household strategies, and the cumulative causation of migration", *Population Index*, 56(1), pp. 3-26.