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## **Transnational entrepreneurial activities: A qualitative network study of self-employed migrants from the former Soviet Union in Germany**

**Elena Sommer, Markus Gamper**

### **Abstract**

During their careers, migrant entrepreneurs may get involved in different types of transnational entrepreneurial activities and use their social capital to activate transnational business-related ties. Based on content analysis of semi-structured interviews and network maps with self-employed migrants from the former Soviet Union in Germany this study identified four empirically grounded types of migrant transnational entrepreneurial activities and analysed transnational networking strategies for each type. The study demonstrates that different types of social capital are mobilised for different types of transnational business strategies, with intensive transnational entrepreneurial activities requiring larger pre-existing networks in the country of origin of both strong and weak ties, that are gradually extended, while a more limited set of mostly informal weak ties suffice for more sporadic transnational activities in the country of origin. Transnational entrepreneurial activities with other countries or with multiple countries, on the other hand, involved a more formal network of relationships.

### **1. Introduction**

Cross-border economic activities are not a new phenomenon and international trade fostered by various diaspora across the world has existed for a long time before the globalisation era (Light 2008). However, progress in communication technologies, lower transport costs, increasing migration, restructuring of international trade as well as globalisation of capital and labour have increased the intensity and diversity of transnational entrepreneurial activities (Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Light 2008). In the last two decades, transnational entrepreneurship of migrants has gained increased attention in migration studies (e.g. Portes et al. 2002; Zhou 2004; Light 2008; Drori 2009, Bagwell 2015).

Migrants involved in transnational entrepreneurial activities can take advantage of their language skills, knowledge of international markets as well as ability to flexibly operate between different cultural systems and structural frameworks. In addition, social networks across borders are seen as an important resource for transnational entrepreneurship (Chen & Tan 2009). However, little is known about how migrants' social capital is accessed and used for different types of transnational entrepreneurial activities. In order to partially fill this gap, this paper explores the accessibility and use of social capital for different types of transnational entrepreneurial activities. The theoretical framework of the study focuses particularly on the concepts of *Social Capital* (e.g. Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 1995; Lin 2001) and *Mixed Embeddedness* (Kloostermann & Rath 2001) and integrates further relevant concepts dealing with the nature of social ties from migration and entrepreneurship research (e.g. Ryan 2011, Faist, 2014, Uzzi 1997).

A qualitative approach is particularly suited for studying the complexity of social capital as well as the context, dynamics and structural conditions framing transnational activities of migrants (Hollstein 2011). In this paper, we use such an approach to identify types of migrant transnational entrepreneurial activities and analyse the networking strategies for each type,

based on the interviews with self-employed migrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Germany. Since the 1990s, about 2.6 million FSU migrants (mostly *Aussiedler* – ethnic Germans from the German minority group in the FSU) arrived in Germany from the successor countries of the former Soviet Union (Sommer 2011). Compared to other migrant groups in Germany, due to their ethnic background, most FSU migrants have a privileged legal status, which is reflected in their access to German citizenship and inclusion into the German welfare system. Also, compared to other migrant groups in Germany, FSU migrants have a relatively low self-employment rate (Leicht et al. 2005). Until now only a few studies describe the self-employment of FSU migrants (Kapphan 1997, Leicht et al. 2005, Sommer 2011). They show that FSU migrants mainly operate on the local market in Germany with no particular spatial or branch-specific concentration. Despite the fact that a large proportion of FSU migrants have dual citizenship, which is favorable for transnational entrepreneurship, only few FSU migrants have companies that use transnational business interactions as their central strategy. Sporadic temporary transnational entrepreneurial activities that are used as a complementary strategy are more common.

Our study explores what kind of social capital FSU migrants use (in terms of its geographic composition and contact paths of the formation of business networks) when they get involved in different types of transnational entrepreneurial activities,. We are using the term *transnational entrepreneurial activities* (TEA) rather than transnational entrepreneurship in this paper as we refer to a wide range of business activities involving regular or occasional cross-border interactions that can be of different nature, intensity and level of formalisation, and that do not necessarily build the central strategy of the firm requiring frequent cross-border contacts as in the case of transnational entrepreneurship (Portes et al. 2002). Our study demonstrates that different types of TEA are characterised by a different use of social capital and that migrants can be involved in several types of TEA during their entrepreneurial career.

An analysis of social capital of migrant entrepreneurs could benefit from incorporating theoretical concepts from sociology, in particular from social capital research, and from migration and entrepreneurship research. This paper uses insights from these different fields. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the main theoretical concepts in the research field of social capital that are relevant for our analysis of the network characteristics of migrant entrepreneurs. Section 3 gives a brief overview of research of transnational entrepreneurial activities from scholarship on transnationalism. Section 4 describes the sample and the applied methodological procedure. Section 5 presents the derived types of transnational entrepreneurial activities among FSU migrants in Germany. Empirical findings are supported by some selected examples using business network maps for illustration purposes. Section 6 summarises the findings and shortcomings of the study and presents some suggestions for future research.

## **2. Social capital and migrant entrepreneurship**

Economic action is embedded in social structure, which to some extent determines the scope of economic activities (Granovetter 1985, Uzzi 1997). Studying migrant entrepreneurship, Kloosterman and Rath (2001) extended this general embeddedness approach by adding the dimension of institutional context to emphasise the highly institutional nature of businesses in Europe. Their *mixed embeddedness* approach considers the interplay between migrants' resources (social, cultural and economic capital), opportunity structure (e.g. demand for products and services, costs of production and labour, legal framework), and institutions operating between them (e.g. migration policies, welfare regimes). In our study we apply the *mixed embeddedness* approach as our conceptual framework, but we use it through a

transnational perspective (which implies analysing resources and the opportunity structure in at least two different national contexts and interactions between them at the transnational level).

Related to the notion of the social embeddedness of economic action is the concept of social capital with its various definitions and interpretations has been widely used in migration research since the 1990s (Portes 1995; Hagan 1998; Wilson 1998; Evergeti & Zontini 2006; Haug & Pointer 2007; Gamper et al. 2013, Gamper 2015). According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to resources that can be mobilised in order to enable access to collective capital, and its strength lies particularly in its convertibility into economic capital. Therefore, it is an important resource for entrepreneurial activities. Coleman (1988) and Lin (2001) also emphasised the functional and purposive nature of social capital. Social capital is not simply the sum of all existing social ties, but reflects those ties that are actually available and can be accessed for certain purposes.

Three main sources of social capital are generally differentiated in migration studies: the migrant community in the country of destination, ties with the host population in the country of destination, and transnational ties in the country of origin (Haug & Pointer 2007). Most empirical studies on migrant entrepreneurship (e.g. Portes & Sensenbrenner 1995; Kloosterman & Rath 2001, Pütz 2004) showed that especially in the early business establishment phase, migrants often rely on resources from dense migrant networks in the country of destination. These resources are mainly used for the acquisition of the financial start-up capital, recruitment of employees and suppliers and for information exchange. The access to these resources is often associated with *ethnic solidarity*, which is based on the expected norm of mutual support between members of the same migrant community due to “cultural similarity” and to difficulties accessing formal support systems (Faist 2000). Although dense multiplex networks are often based on trust and solidarity reducing transaction costs, there are also some potential downsides that can be contra-productive for further business development as they place high personal obligations on their members with increased social control and prevent their members from accessing broader business networks (Portes & Landolt 1996). Several studies show that relying only on resources from the migrant community can result in a mobility trap and lead to isolation from the mainstream economy (Bates 1994, Goebel & Pries 2006). Granovetter (1995) describes the mechanism of *coupling and decoupling* whereby migrants draw on the resources from the migrant community (mainly strong ties to family and peers) in the initial phase of business establishment but over time successful entrepreneurs tend to broaden their business ties beyond this group favouring *specialised ties* (Wellman 1984) in order to gain more autonomy and to be able to operate in larger markets.

Although most studies of migrant business emphasise the importance of ethnic intra-community social capital for the business formation, they rarely look at its content and the context of accessibility, assuming that it is simply available to all members of migrant community prior to business start-up. However, social capital within a migrant community is not evenly distributed and available to all migrants of the same origin (Franzen & Pointer 2007). Also the value of social capital that can be gained from the migrant community depends on *horizontal* (ties between individuals in the same social position) and *vertical ties* (between individuals in different social positions, Ryan 2011) to members of this community, as members have different hierarchical social statuses. Tolciu (2011), studying Turkish migrants in Germany, criticises the assumption of natural ethnic solidarity and adopts the concept of *bounded rationality* put forth by Simon (1993) where entrepreneurial outcomes are a matter of optimisation under constraints. Unable to achieve optimal rationality due to external (e.g. institutional context) and internal (e.g. limited access to mainstream business networks and financial resources) constraints, migrants choose a satisfactory alternative

instead. They use social capital from their migrant community not necessarily because of their ethnic identification or ethnic solidarity but rather because they understand their ethnic social capital as a strategic, economic resource for action. While a large number of studies analyse the function of local ethnic social capital for migrant businesses, a detailed systematic analysis of how and what type of social capital is accessed and used by self-employed migrants when they get involved in transnational business activities is still lacking.

Social capital is functional and dynamic. Similar to other entrepreneurs, self-employed migrants develop different networking strategies. Ryan & Mulholland (2014) emphasise that 'studying migrant networking it is necessary not only to consider the structure and composition of networks but also their content – the nature of the relationships that exist within different social ties' (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014: 149). It is not simply the connection that matters but the nature of the relationship as different types of relationships are linked to different functions and types of resources. Especially for migrant business, it is important to look at further characteristics of business-related social ties that go beyond a rather simplistic differentiation based on ethnic category. In addition to intra-community versus inter-community links, a further differentiation between *bridging social capital* (horizontal ties among heterogeneous actors) and *linking social capital* (vertical ties) is important as these two types of social capital are associated with different accessibility constraints, economic functions and resources (Szreter & Woolcock 2004). In addition, business relationships involve different degrees of formalisation (e.g. informal, formal, institutionalised). They can be purely price-regulated ("arm's-length business ties", Uzzi 1997) or involve trust and reciprocity ("embedded ties", Uzzi 1997).

### **3. Transnational entrepreneurial activities of migrants**

Similar to social capital, the concept of transnationalism has increasingly gained importance in migration research in the last two decades (e.g. Vertovec 1999, Pries 2001). Pioneers of transnationalism research Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992) defined transnationalism as 'the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement' (Glick Schiller et al. 1992: 1). In recent transnationalism research, the prefix "trans-" refers to social, economic, political and cultural cross-border relations.

Increasing cross-border economic activities are not an exclusive feature of migrant enterprises. Internationalisation of economic activities is a common strategy of economic growth amongst firms in general in the globalisation era (Drori et al. 2009). The term *transnational entrepreneurship (TE)* is mostly applied to internationalisation of businesses run by migrant populations and treated as a special case of international entrepreneurship (Drori et al. 2009). Involvement in dual social fields and exploitation of cross-border social capital for business opportunities is seen as a distinctive feature of TE. TE is associated with dual embeddedness in different political-economic institutional settings as well as in different cultural and knowledge frameworks and the ability to balance this dual embeddedness forming entrepreneurial strategies within a given social context (Light 2008, Drori et al. 2009). This dual affiliation distinguishes TE from classical international entrepreneurship. The economic adaptation of TE is often enabled by mobilisation of social networks across borders whereby self-employed migrants use both their local and transnational connections (Chen & Tan 2009). Therefore, transnational ties should not be analysed in isolation but together with the local ties in the country of destination. Especially in case of *transnational brokerage* (Faist 2014) when migrant entrepreneurs function as mediators connecting networks in country of destination with networks in country of origin (or other country), it is also important to analyse relationships between actors in different countries that are

interconnected through the migrant entrepreneur as relationship between them might have an impact for the overall success of transnational business.

Transnational entrepreneurial activities of self-employed migrants are recently gaining attention by scholars from various disciplines (e.g. Landolt 2001, Portes et al. 2002, Guarnizo 2003, Morawska 2004, Rusinovic 2008, Drori et al. 2009, Mustafa & Chen 2010, Bagwell 2015). Transnational migrant entrepreneurs activate existing social ties in their country of origin or strategically build up new contacts that could be beneficial for their economic activities (Landolt 2001, Zhou 2004). Drori et al. (2009) differentiate between three domains of networking that are used by transnational entrepreneurs: network of origin, network of destination and network of industry. The latter consists of professional ties that evolve as a part of previous education and work experience.

Although transnational entrepreneurial activities usually involve the country of destination and the country of origin, recent research shows that transnational entrepreneurship is increasingly becoming characterised by multi-polar rather than bipolar links (Bagwell 2015). Migrants can have family members in different countries or acquire transnational business contacts in third countries directly through their network of industry or their connections in *diasporic nodes* (communities of migrants of same origin in different geographic places, Voight-Graf 2004). The links between diasporic nodes in different countries enable transnational flows of information, money, ideas, and products (Voight-Graf 2004) and are a valuable resource of transnational social capital beyond the country of origin and the country of destination.

Itzigsohn et al. (1999) differentiated between *narrow* and *broad economic transnationalism* as two extremes of a continuum. *Narrow economic transnationalism* is characterised by regular transnational contacts and economic interactions as a central element of the business. *Broad economic transnationalism*, on the other hand, is defined as “economic transactions [...] that are more or less recurrent, but do not involve regular movement or constant involvement between the two places” (Itzigsohn et al. 1999: 327). These two different strategies indicate different degrees and types of transnational involvement. Regular and intensive long-term involvement in transnational economic activities in the sense of narrow economic transnationalism requires a higher degree of formalisation as compared to sporadic transnational entrepreneurial activities in the sense of broad economic transnationalism that often have an informal character.

Portes et al. (2002) defined transnational entrepreneurs as “self-employed immigrants whose business activities require frequent travel abroad and who depend for the success of their firms on their contacts and associates in another country, primarily their country of origin” (Portes et al. 2002: 284). Their definition follows the *narrow economic transnationalism* approach. This approach, however, neglects sporadic transnational involvement, and especially informal activities. Although involvement in transnational entrepreneurship offers migrants some business advantages, it is associated with certain challenges. Transnational entrepreneurs need constantly to evaluate and negotiate opportunities, constraints and obligations across borders (Landolt 2001). Further they need the ability to flexibly operate between at least two different and possibly changing structural and cultural business contexts. Embeddedness in various formal and informal transnational networks can be crucial for the survival and success of transnational business. However, vertical ties (linking social capital), that is, ties to persons in higher positions or institutions are not easily accessible. Apart from migrants’ resources, the geopolitical, institutional and socio-economic situation in countries involved in TEA (e.g. visa and trade regulations, geographic proximity, migration system, financial stability) as well as historical international relations between these countries can affect the extent to which transnational entrepreneurship is common among a certain migrant group in a particular place (Miera 2008). Given the mentioned constraints and challenges, narrow economic transnationalism is relatively rare among migrant

entrepreneurs. Broad economic transnationalism, that is rarely studied, on the other hand, is often applied as an additional complementary strategy that enables certain business advantages (e.g. Rusinovic 2008, Schmiz 2011). To reflect transnational involvement in both narrow and broad sense including sporadic and informal transnational business activities we avoid using the term *transnational entrepreneurship* in the narrow sense as defined by Portes et al. (2002) in this paper and use the term *transnational entrepreneurial activities* (TEA).

The research goal of this paper is to explore what kind of social capital is used by self-employed migrants when they get involved in different types of transnational business activities. Specifically, we aim to understand, first, how social capital is accessed and activated for different types of TEA; second, at a relational level, what type of business relationships are dominating for each type; and third, how do social capital and TEA (co-)evolve over time. The theoretical concepts outlined in the previous section (e.g., mixed embeddedness, the location, formalisation, and directionality of ties) serve as analytical tools that help us focus our analysis.

#### **4. Methodology and sample**

According to White (1992), networks are constructed and are subject to dynamic processes, which are reflected in the 'stories' behind the ties where "*(n)etwork is a verb, and we tell stories in network terms*" (White 1992: 66). Qualitative approaches are especially appropriate for analysing content, accessibility and dynamics of social networks (Hollstein 2011) and therefore for analysing those stories behind the ties (Gamper et al. 2012). Consequently, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study. In total 62 self-employed (or formerly self-employed) first-generation migrants from the former Soviet Union living in the German region North Rhine-Westphalia were interviewed between September 2011 and December 2012. A combination of snowball sampling, and search in Russian-speaking print media and online portals was used to contact possible respondents.

Interviews were conducted for a broader research project dealing with different types of migrant self-employment (including ethnic niche businesses and companies operating on the local market). Only 37 of the 62 interviewed owners of small businesses were involved in TEA either at the time of the interview or earlier in their post-migration entrepreneurial career. The analysis presented in this paper is, therefore, based on the subsample of 37 interviews with respondents involved in TEA. The subsample includes respondents of both genders (27 males & 10 females), different FSU migrant subgroups (15 ethnic Germans, 17 Jewish migrants & 5 other migrants), different age groups (ranging from 24 years to 61 years old) and length of stay in Germany (arrival to Germany between 1987 and 2003 with the vast majority arriving in the 1990s).

To ensure the heterogeneity of the theoretical sample in the sense of *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss 2007), the interviews were conducted in three batches whereby the selection of further participants was guided by concepts that emerged from initial data analysis of previous interviews. Semi-structured problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000) were held with the respondents, covering such themes as previous employment history, reasons for becoming self-employed, previous entrepreneurial experiences and use of social contacts for previous and current self-employment. This type of interviewing was chosen because it combines deductive and inductive elements of data collection and it is oriented towards a specific problem-centered theme, which is especially suitable for interviews under time constraints (as in case of busy entrepreneurs). A particular focus of the interview was given to the use of social capital for migrant business as well as to potential access barriers to certain types of social capital and strategies of overcoming those barriers. Interviews lasted on average about 40 minutes. They were conducted in German and Russian, and then transcribed.

In the first stage of the qualitative data analysis (Mayring 2004) the interview passages dealing with transnational entrepreneurial activities were analysed using a mixture of concept-driven (based on literature review) and inductive empirically-driven codes. In the second stage, empirically grounded types (Kluge 2004) of migrant transnational entrepreneurial activities were derived. The goal of types construction was to identify in the empirical data types of activities with as similar as possible attributes within a type and possibly strong differences between types (*internal and external heterogeneity*, Kluge 2000). The construction of types enables systematic reduction of a rich variety of case-specific data to few relevant types based on empirical regularity, theoretical knowledge and analysis of meaningful relationships. At the same time, this method encourages usage of case-specific examples for explanation and illustration of constructed types.

In addition to the qualitative data collection, weak structured and standardised network data collection using network maps (Gamper et al. 2012; Herz et al. 2015) was integrated in some of the interviews (16 in total). Although initially this additional method of data collection was planned as a supplementary method in the sense of a mixed-methods embedded design (Hollstein 2014), it was not possible to implement it in practice in all interviews mainly due to respondents' time constraints but also because some respondents refused to draw their networks as some of them found this task cognitively challenging or had concerns about sharing too many personal details. Further, although the vast majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, some of the interviews were conducted on the phone where it was also not possible to integrate this approach. Some of the limitations (e.g. depicting dynamic aspects on a static map) and ethical issues (e.g. not-neutral data collection tool) of network maps are discussed by Gamper et al. (2012) and Ryan et al. (2014). Despite these limitations, this approach, however, proved to be a useful tool for generating discussions (see e.g. Herz et al. 2015). Combined with qualitative interview data, it is a rich source for data analysis when it is integrated in mixed-methods research designs (Bilecen 2016).

The procedure of the network map data collection started with the name generator: "Please tell me the names or initials of those who are important for your business?". It was followed by a set of standardised name interpreters and questions about the ties between the actors. To explore the meaning attached to social ties, respondents were asked additional questions about particular actors in their business networks. In general, the result of this exercise was a history of the current personal business network based on narratives from the ego-centered perspective of the respondent. Unfortunately, a systematic comparative analysis of network data collected for this study in the sense of structural analysis was not feasible as network maps are only available for a small number of interviews. Therefore, the network maps were mainly used for illustration purposes of case examples in this paper. They were designed following the concentric circles diagram approach by Kahn and Antonucci (1980) using the software VennMaker<sup>1</sup> based on the data collected during the interview.

## **5. Types of transnational entrepreneurial activities of FSU migrants in Germany**

Four types of migrant TEA were identified in the interview data. They are presented in the next section with some illustrative case examples. The types were built according to the combination of involved countries (country of destination, country of origin and other countries; bipolar vs. multipolar) and the intensity of TEA (central strategy: businesses that are involved in TEA on a regular basis and for which the transnational involvement is an essential part of the business vs. complementary strategy: businesses that sporadically get involved in TEA). For each identified type we then analysed characteristics of involved transnational social ties looking at the time point of the first contact (pre-migration vs. post-migration), contact paths (e.g. existing pre-migration ties, direct approach, referral, diasporic

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<sup>1</sup> [www.vennmaker.com](http://www.vennmaker.com)

nodes etc.) and types of business-related relationships (weak vs. strong ties, formal vs. informal, arm's-length business ties vs. embedded business ties).

Some respondents were involved in several types of TEA during their entrepreneurial career mostly replacing one type of TEA by another or giving up TEA in favour of local business in Germany. Four respondents reported about a temporary return to their country of origin (for up to two years) where they got involved in TEA with Germany but this kind of TEA was excluded from this study as it is questionable whether they are comparable to other migrant entrepreneurs in the sample because their businesses were registered in the country of origin where they were temporarily living.

### **Type I: Complementary transnational entrepreneurial activities involving country of origin**

The first type, complementary TEA with the country of origin, is the most common type of TEA found in the empirical data: 17 respondents whose business primarily focused on the market in Germany sporadically got involved in complementary (temporary) TEA that were not essential for the overall success of their business but were perceived as facilitating additional competitive advantages. This type of sporadic TEA reflects the broad economic transnationalism approach (Itzigsohn et al. 1999). Occasional complementary TEA do not require frequent physical travels between countries and they can be fostered by virtual cross-border communication. They also require a lesser extent of dual embeddedness in various political-economic institutional settings and are associated with less structural constraints in the sense of *mixed embeddedness* approach (Kloosterman & Rath 2001) as compared to intensive TEA in the narrow sense that build the central business strategy. Complementary TEA are mostly oriented towards the opportunity side rather than towards the demand side. Local networks in Germany are essential for the self-employed migrants involved in this type of TEA as their main business is located in Germany and existing social contacts in the country of origin are seen as potential source for additional occasional business opportunities.

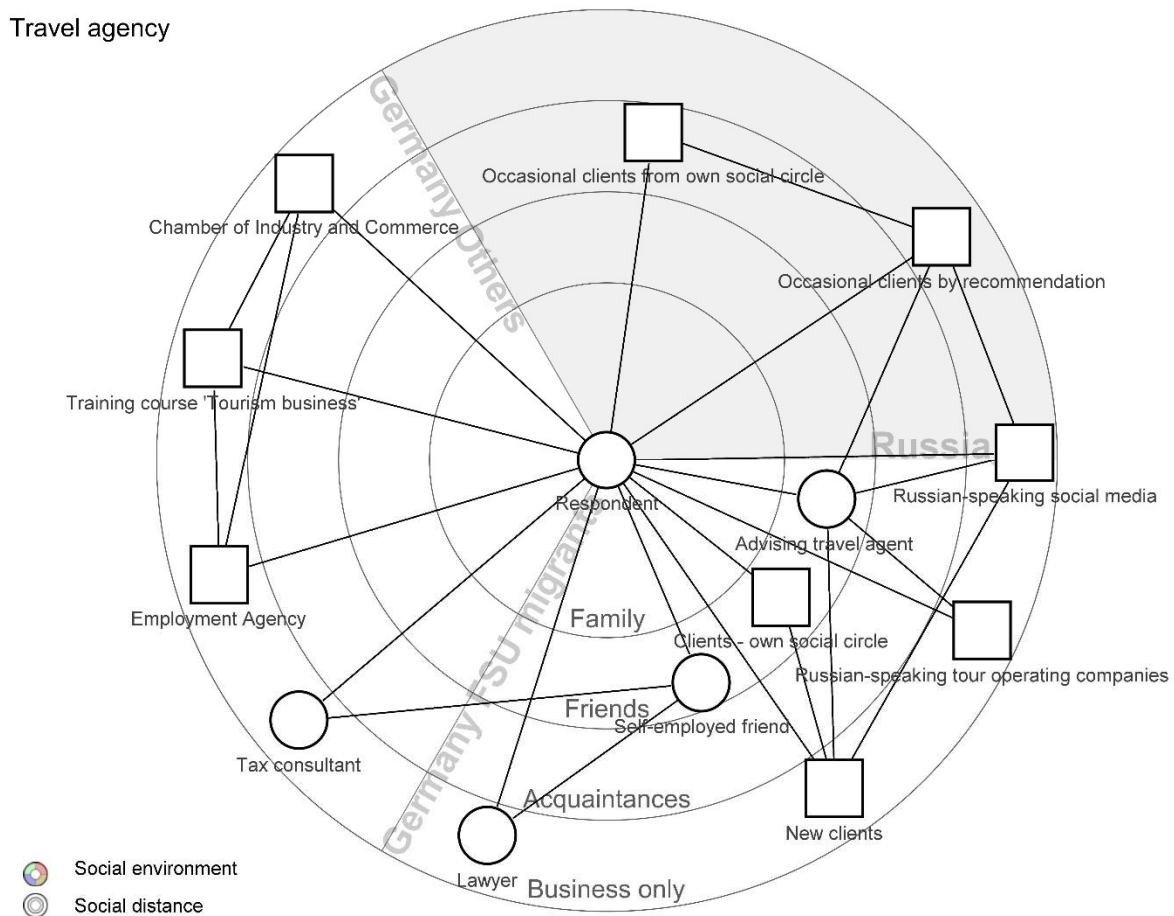
Figure 2 shows the business network map of a respondent involved in the tourism business. Mainly due to language barriers, the respondent decided to focus on the Russian-speaking migrant community in Germany as her main target client group, offering guided tours in Russian to various places in Germany and other European countries. She tried to get in touch with established Russian-speaking travel agencies in the German city where she lives in order to get some information and practical advice but because of high competition in this sector of the ethnic niche, she was denied any support until she contacted an FSU migrant running a travel agency in a different region in Germany ('advising travel agent' in the Figure 1) via Russian-language online social media:

*'They are not willing to help someone to become their next competitor. So I was searching in internet and in the Russian-speaking social media and I found there this woman who is running a travel agency in Bavaria. I contacted her. And we talked for more than an hour. [...] Because we are not competitors. We are in different areas. She helped me a lot and still helping. [...] We are now planning some joint projects'* (Travel agency, female, 52 years old).

In the sense of bounded rationality that aims at optimisation under constraints, being unable to cooperate neither with German companies due to language barriers nor with migrant Russian-speaking travel agencies due to the high competition in this sector, the respondent approached someone whom she did not know herself or was referred to by others to enable intra-community 'jumping'. At the same time she also uses an intra-community linking strategy and shares the same tax consultant and lawyer with one of her friends who is self-employed in a different sector and who referred her to them. Although the majority of her clients are from the Russian-speaking migrant community in Germany, some clients are

tourists from Russia or other FSU countries coming to visit Germany. This respondent actively advertises her business in Russian-speaking social media forwarding this information to all her existing online contacts in Germany and Russia. Whereas in the beginning, the majority of such occasional clients from Russia were weak ties from the respondent's own transnational social circle, additional clients from the FSU countries started contacting her mostly by recommendation later. The respondent sees this development as an additional market advantage and a possibility to gain more autonomy from the Russian-speaking entrepreneurial community in Germany and plans to intensify her transnational entrepreneurial activities in the future by direct approaching of travel agencies in Russia as potential business partners.

Figure 1: Business network map of a respondent involved in tourism business (Circles indicate individuals, squares indicate groups of people or institutions)



Most respondents involved in complementary TEA were mainly using their social capital in Germany for business purposes. When they occasionally got involved in TEA, they used predominantly weak ties to existing pre-migration contacts in their country of origin. While several studies dealing with transnational business activities (e.g. Rusinovic 2008, Mustafa & Chen 2010) emphasise the importance of family ties in the country of origin for transnational entrepreneurship, in case of FSU migrants in Germany who mostly migrated to Germany as a family unit often consisting of several generations (Sommer & Vogel 2016), the family ties are usually based in the country of destination and they mostly use weak ties in the country of origin for their complementary TEA. These were mostly informal embedded, ties involving some degree of trust and reciprocity. Some specific sectors, however, e.g. education or translation services, also involved formal, price-regulated transnational business relationships. As mostly existing pre-migration weak ties are used, they are often located in

the respondent's previous place of residence in the country of origin. Pre-migration weak ties are also often used as a forwarding channel to potential clients and business partners. In contrast, contacts in the Russian-speaking migrant community in Germany are rarely used for complementary TEA.

## **Type II: Intensive transnational entrepreneurial activities involving country of origin**

The second type includes migrant businesses whose central business strategy involves regular and intensive transnational economic activities in the country of origin following narrow economic transnationalism (Itzigsohn et al. 1999) or transnational entrepreneurship (Portes et al. 2002) approaches. Regular intensive TEA require flexibility to adapt to different structural contexts that change over time as well as high investments in building business relationships of different nature in two different countries.

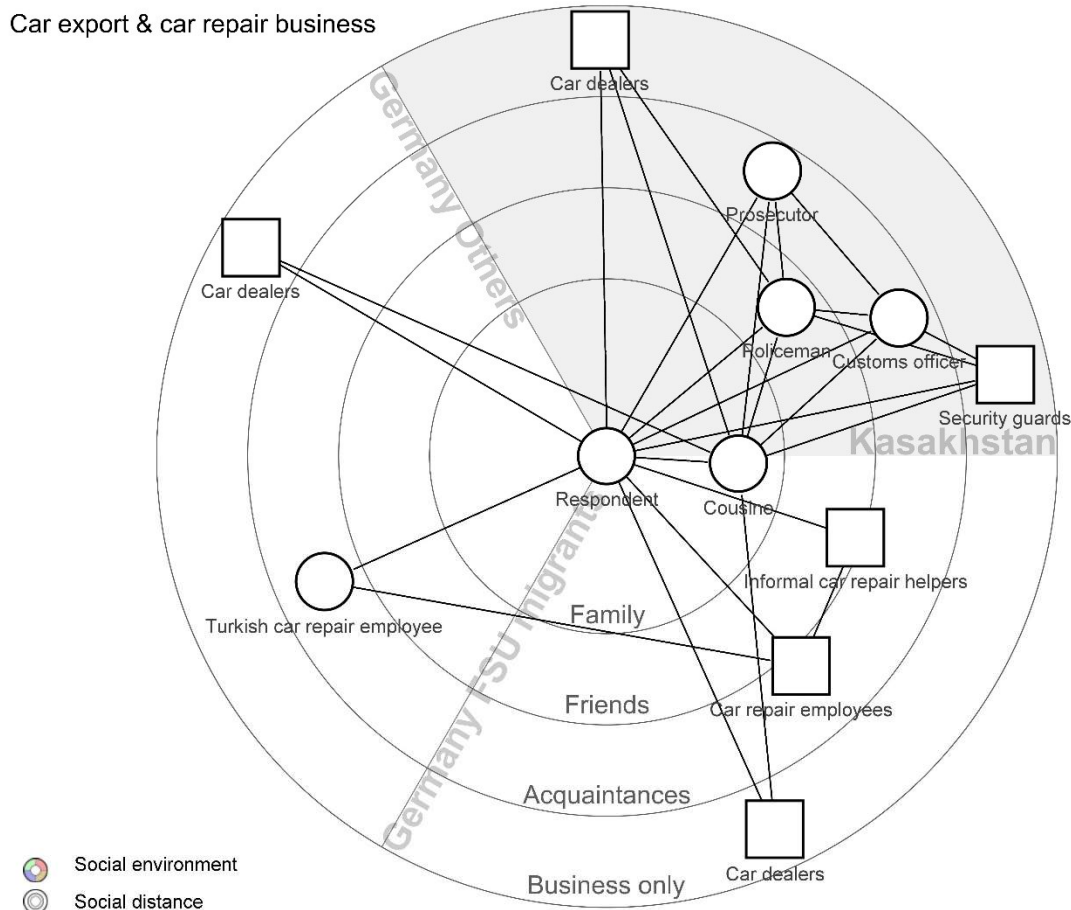
Only two respondents were involved in this type of TEA at the time point of the interview. Seven other respondents, however, reported that they were using this strategy for some time in the past. Most of them were involved in export business to FSU countries in the 1990s and early 2000s and the duration of their post-migration stay in Germany when they started their business was relatively short. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, there was a growing market for second-hand cars and technical appliances from Germany. Some FSU migrants living in Germany saw a lucrative business opportunity resulting from this demand. Although respondents previously involved in such export activities were satisfied with their profit, after a few years they decided to give it up either partially or completely. Main reasons for such a decision were the need of frequent travels between different countries as most respondents were transporting their export goods personally, dealing with formal and informal practices at various border controls and customs, the risk of loss of control in one of the countries during longer periods of physical absence as well as corruption and economic instabilities in the FSU countries. Especially in the 1990s, trade in transforming FSU countries was characterised by a high degree of corruption, informal practices and frequent law changes (Ledeneva 2006). The prevalence of informal practices can be interpreted as a reaction to the inefficiency and deficits of formal structures and institutional governance (Lovell 2008). Unspoken tolerance of informal practices by authorities was associated with certain economic benefits for transnational businesses that were able to operate between various informal structures. As informal practices are usually based on trust, there was a need for finding 'persons of trust', especially vertical ties with authorities, who could facilitate access to certain resources such as, for example, information or help with administrative procedures.

Figure 2 demonstrates business network of a respondent who was previously involved in intensive TEA. He was involved in second-hand car export between 2005 and 2007. At the same time he was also running a small car repair business in Germany but the main profit was coming from the car export. Three years after his migration to Germany he went for one year back to his country of origin, Kazakhstan, where he was involved in various informal business activities. He used the financial resources and social contacts acquired during his temporary return for his later self-employment in Germany. The key three contacts for his car export business were a multiplex relation to a policeman (his father's friend whom he has known since childhood) as well as a prosecutor and a customs officer on the Kazakh border to whom he was referred to by the policeman. The policeman had a brokerage position and was in charge of the overall control of the business situation in Kazakhstan. The respondent was responsible for buying cars in Germany and transporting them to Kazakhstan. Through his linkages to authorities, the respondent had a privileged access to reliable information which he could strategically use for his business activities:

*'So on New Year's Eve 2006-2007 the informants from there (Kazakhstan), [...] people who are close to the government, told us: 'Listen, the customs duty will be increased soon [...]'. Before New Year's Eve we only had 12 cars. We quickly bought everything we could find*

here (in Germany) within a 200 km radius and send there. This was a big amount, about 100 cars' (Car repair and car export business owner, male, 38 years old).

Figure 2: Business network map of a respondent involved in car export and car repair business (Circles indicate individuals, squares indicate groups of people)



The increasing number of exported cars led to the need for security staff to watch after them on the border before they could be collected by the car dealers. A security company that also took over customs clearance was hired for this task. This task sharing enabled the respondent to spend less time in Kazakhstan but some problems started occurring when he was absent for longer periods of time:

*'Everything ran smoothly there (Kazakhstan) in, let's say, first eight months. And then it started. They started to steal money. [...] To stop this, I sent someone from here (Germany). [...] That's why this person (respondent's cousin from Germany) came there to watch them, so that we also have a person of trust from our side there'* (Car repair and car export business owner, male, 38 years old).

As the respondent was not able to spend longer periods of time in Kazakhstan because he had to take care of car purchase and his car repair business in Germany and because of his familial duties, in order to minimise the risks of control loss during his absence, he 'sent' his cousin who was also his business partner (multiplex strong tie) to Kazakhstan as a 'person of trust' to monitor the situation on the border. After a couple of months, however, the respondent gave up the car export business at the end of 2007 due to the economic instabilities in Kazakhstan and decided to concentrate on his car repair business in Germany as his central business strategy with sporadic involvement in TEA using them as a complementary business strategy.

All respondents except one case involved in intensive TEA were male. In the start-up phase, most respondents following this business strategy were using their existing pre-migration relationships, a mixture of strong and weak ties, with persons in their country of origin. In order to ensure long-term development of their businesses, most respondents strategically extended their transnational business networks over time with new business contacts, especially to institutions and persons in higher social positions. The access to linking social capital (vertical ties) was usually mediated by already existing pre-migration contacts often involving the mechanism of transitive trust. Especially in the beginning of the transnational entrepreneurial career, informal relationships with high degree of trust and reciprocity played an important role for the business development. Their relevance, however, decreased over time and after the start-up phase respondents favored formal business relationships that were regulated by prices and contracts. With increasing time spent in the market, most respondents were able to develop formal specialised business relationships by directly approaching potential business-related contacts themselves whereby longstanding entrepreneurial experience, market knowledge and formal contracts served as a guarantee for reliability and trustworthiness and substituted the need for mediating persons. Despite increasing overall formalisation of business networks over time, most respondents, however, maintained some of the informal relationships because these relationships based on trust and loyalty provided them with additional competitive advantages mostly by enabling privileged access to information. As mentioned above, most of the respondents involved in this type of TEA at early stages of their post-migration entrepreneurial career, gave up this strategy: they either dropped it in favour of Type I complementary TEA (4 respondents) or gave up self-employment entirely (3 respondents).

### **Type III: Transnational entrepreneurial activities not involving country of origin**

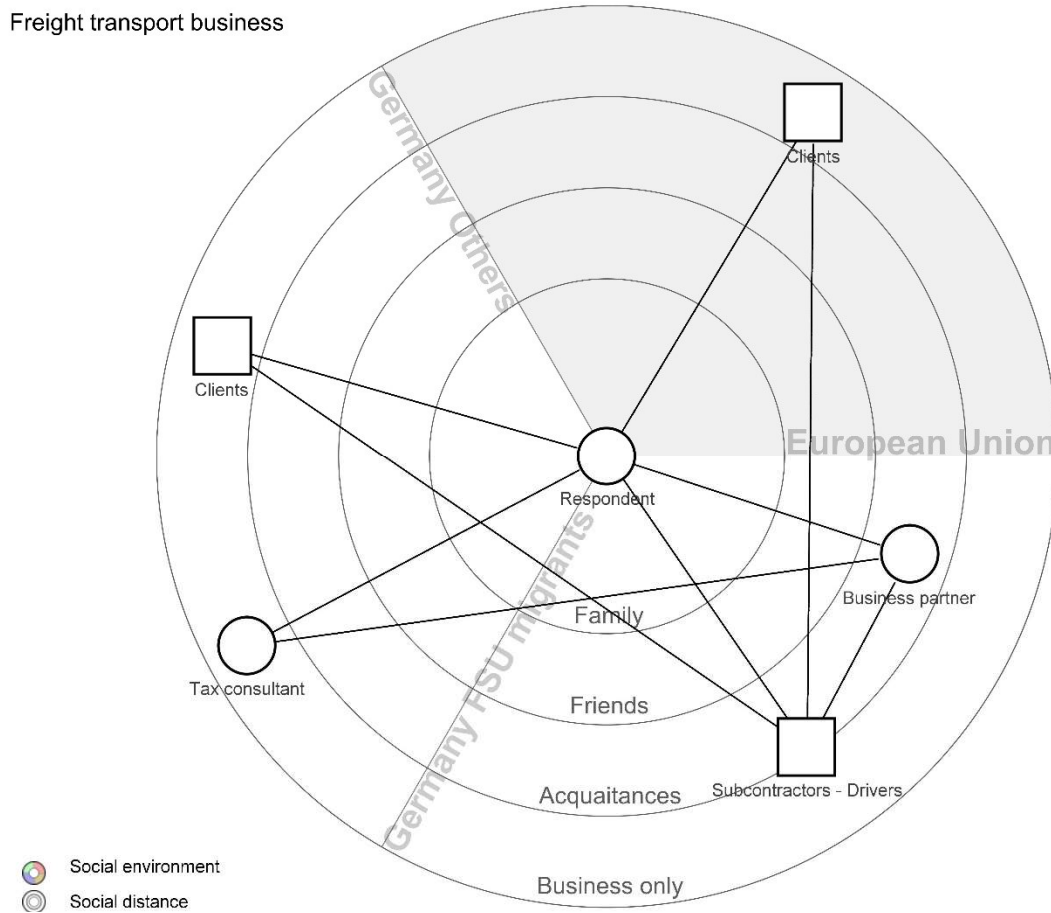
Although most migrant transnational businesses involve interactions between the country of destination and the country of origin (Zhou 2004), some self-employed migrants get engaged in transnational entrepreneurial activities with other countries. In total, nine respondents were involved in this third type of TEA.

Some specific branches involved in TEA in third countries, for example, companies transporting goods across borders or online retailers usually directly contact potential clients and business partners in other European countries and predominantly have formal contract-regulated relationships with them. Figure 3 is an example of a business network of a freight forwarding company transporting goods within Germany and across the European Union. The respondent's company works with six subcontractor drivers, all of whom are FSU migrants in Germany and whom he either has known from previous jobs or who were recommended to him. The clients are mainly German or European companies that were directly approached by the respondent via special professional business online portals. Over time some of the clients became regular customers. Due to a previous negative experience, the respondent prefers to have formal contract-based business relationships with actors involved in his business network and to avoid business relationships with family or friends.

This type of TEA can be both a complementary (6 respondents) and a central business (3 respondents) strategy. It is characterised by the use of specialised transnational ties. Especially younger respondents involved in this type of TEA were mainly using their professional ties in the sense of network of industry (Drori et al. 2009) to expand their economic activities beyond the country of destination. Similar to findings from the study by Gamper & Fencia (2013), migrants with transnational contacts to third countries mainly acquired those contacts after their migration to Germany. In most cases they either spent some time in this other country (e.g. a graphic designer who went for one year for an internship to the USA and used the contacts he acquired during this time for his business in Germany) or they met a person from the third country in Germany (e.g. a software engineer

who met a student from Czech Republic during his university study in Germany and now cooperates with his company). Six respondents involved in this type used primarily their network of industry for TEA in third countries.

Figure 3: Business network map of a respondent involved in goods transporting business (Circles indicate individuals, squares indicate groups of people)



Whereas the pre-migration ties hardly play any role for this type of TEA, some respondents involved in this type of TEA were using their post-migration contacts in the Russian-speaking community for TEA in third countries (3 respondents). They used the connections between the Russian-speaking community in Germany and Russian-speaking communities in diverse other diasporic nodes in Europe as mediating facility to enlarge their business networks (e.g. a clothes shop owner who was forwarded to a wholesale company in France owned by a Russian migrant by an acquaintance in the Russian-speaking community in Germany). Most respondents involved in this type of TEA predominantly used weak ties and their business ties had a nature of price-regulated arm's-length ties (Uzzi 1997).

#### Type IV: Multipolar transnational entrepreneurial activities

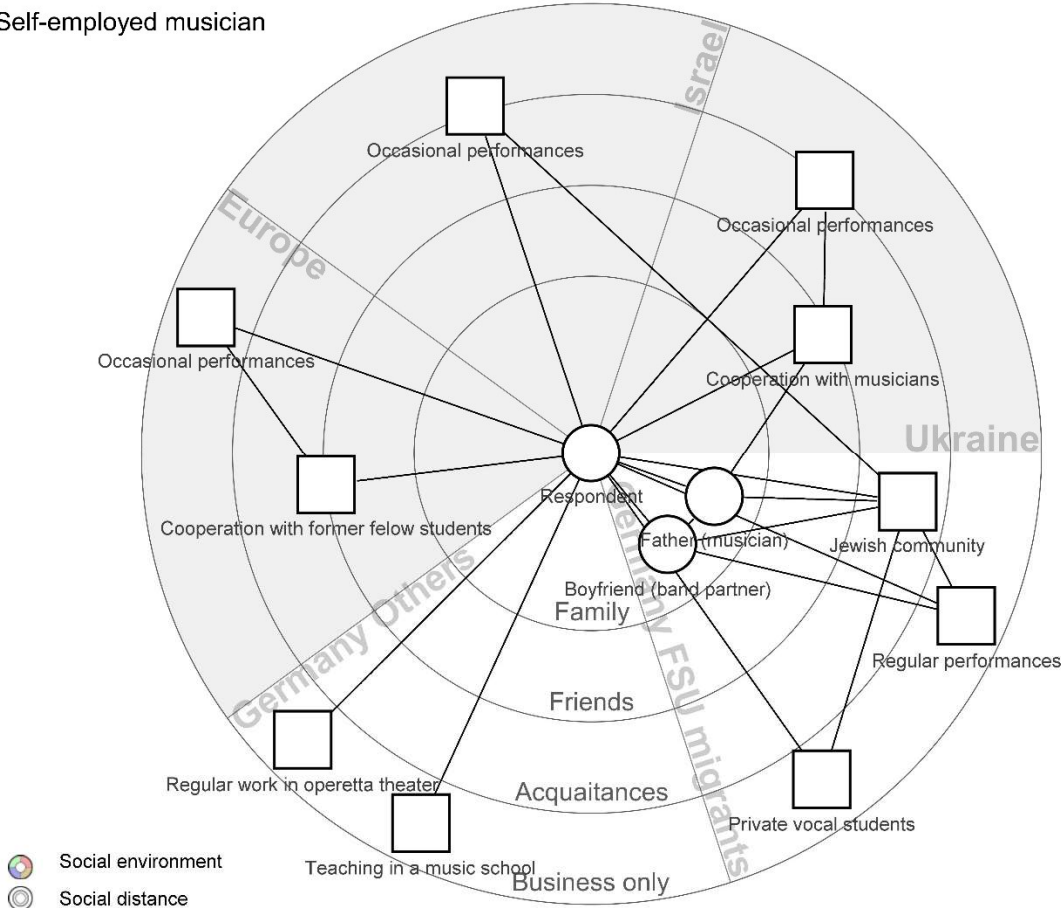
The last strategy involves multipolar TEA using social capital in Germany, the country of origin and at least one other country, mostly in the form of loose dyadic country connections: Germany - country of origin and Germany - third country. If one of the transnational country dyads proves to be problematic, termination of this business relationship is usually not essential for the further development of the business in general as the dyads are rarely



interconnected. Respondents using this strategy flexibly react to the market situation and strategically incorporate economic practices in their social networks. They invest in maintaining social ties that could potentially be useful for their business in different places and different social environments and predominantly use weak ties to persons they have known before and after migration.

Figure 4 illustrates the business network of a musician who is involved in the performance and teaching business. The respondent, who is an active member of the local Jewish community, is specialised among other music styles in Jewish music and vocals. Her connections in the Jewish community (network of destination) provide her with regular performances in the Jewish FSU community in Germany (e.g. religious holidays, festivals, weddings) and with occasional performances in Israel and the USA (diasporic nodes). Further, the respondent uses her contacts in Ukraine (country of origin) for her business (network of origin). She is coming from a family of musicians and can benefit from cooperation with Ukrainian musicians. In addition, the respondent studied opera vocal in Italy and can use her professional network (network of industry) for occasional performances in European countries outside Germany. Apart from performances, the respondent is also involved in teaching business and offers music classes at a German music school as well as to several private students. She flexibly uses weak ties in Germany and other countries for her business and tries to disseminate information about potential business opportunities within her network. At the same time she intentionally avoids brokerage between different parts of business network to be less dependent on interconnections and relationships between her business partners.

Figure 4: Business network map of a self-employed musician (Circles indicate individuals, squares indicate groups of people and institutions)

Self-employed musician



-  Social environment
-  Social distance

This type of TEA is predominantly a complementary strategy as respondents mainly focus their business on activities in Germany but they use potential economic opportunities getting involved in sporadic transnational activities in multiple countries. A distinctive feature of this TEA type is a combination of various networks (network of origin, network of destination & network of industry), various contacting paths and a mixture of both informal and formal relationships. Business networks of migrants using this type of TEA are characterised by a prevalence of bridging social capital connecting migrants with heterogeneous actors in a similar social position. Most respondents using this strategy had an advantage of being able to flexibly react to market changes. Many of them have changed several business strategies during their career of self-employment or were running several businesses at the same time. They had contacts in diverse economic sectors and some of them had an intermediary role in the FSU migrant community by linking other self-employed migrants with potential business partners in Germany and abroad and providing business consultations.

Although most of TEA involved in this type were dyadic connections between two countries (4 respondents), two respondents showed a triad of countries 'Germany - country of origin - third country', where all three countries were essential for the business and where the main business actors in these three countries were interconnected with each other. This strategy involved a combination of various contacting paths and a mixture of formal and informal relationships. It was the central business strategy with a focus on a concrete business concept and required regular transnational interactions with countries involved. Both businesses involved a combination of production and distribution (e.g. production of electronic accessories for mobile phones in China for a Germany-based brand for export to Russia) whereby the competitive advantage resulted from locating different business processes and tasks in different countries. Both respondents had a brokerage position bringing together business partners from their country of origin and a third country. Frequent intensive interactions with actors from business networks in three countries and high investments in maintenance of social capital were essential and disconnecting with one of the countries could cause the crash of the whole business. Regular communication between main business partners contributed to building relationship involving trust in the sense of embedded business ties. At the same time such transnational triadic business networks contained a high proportion of purely price-regulated business relationships (e.g. to manufacturers or retailers) in the sense of arm's-length ties. Existing pre-migration ties were used to establish business relationships in the country of origin. Different contact paths (e.g. pre-migration contacts in the country of origin, FSU migrant community in Germany, referral to or direct approach of potential business partners abroad) were used to get access to business networks in the third involved country.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study shows that self-employed migrants employ diverse and dynamic transnational economic activities. Looking only at transnational entrepreneurship in a narrow sense neglects the role of sporadic transnational involvement for migrant businesses that is more common than regular transnational economic involvement. Intensive TEA as a central business strategy, are rare among our respondents as they were associated with certain risks and constraints and most respondents gave them up in favour of less intensive sporadic TEA. In line with the mixed embeddedness approach (Kloosterman & Rath 2001), the study shows that the scope of action for transnational economic activities is not only influenced by migrants' accessibility to transnational social capital and their individual resources but also by structural frameworks in the respective countries that change over time. In the sense of bounded rationality aiming at optimisation under constraints (Tolciu 2011), sporadic TEA were seen as an alternative economic resource that require less simultaneous embeddedness in the political-economic, institutional and social structures in different countries and that depend less on linking social capital and formal business relationships.

In contrast to private social relationships, business-related social relationships are strategic functional relationships that provide entrepreneurs with resources for their businesses. Findings from our study question the concept of natural ethnic solidarity showing that access to certain types of resources (e.g. information) can be limited due to competition in the ethnic niche. Extending business activities and networks beyond the local ethnic niche can be beneficial but requires additional investments in social capital. Although our respondents used a variety of channels to mobilise social capital from various networks including transnational ties, they rarely functioned as transnational brokers, directly connecting parts of their networks in different countries with each other if they used TEA as their complementary strategy. Although brokers bridging structural holes are generally associated with privileged positions in the network and with economic benefits (Burt 2001), recent studies show the potential vulnerability of brokers in ethnically diverse environments emphasising the pressure associated with brokerage in competitive settings (e.g. Faist 2014, Barnes et al. 2016).

By looking at both narrow and broad economic transnationalism, our study illustrates that these two categories differ not only with regard to the intensity and frequency of TEA and their importance for the overall business success but also with regard to transnational social capital that is mobilised by migrant entrepreneurs for different types of TEA. It further demonstrates the dynamic character of TEA showing that migrant entrepreneurs can switch between different types of TEA adapting to the changing market conditions, structural frameworks and new business opportunities.

While most studies on transnational entrepreneurship focus on migrants' activities between the country of origin and the country of destination, our study demonstrates that TEA can be multipolar. Our study demonstrates that different types of social capital is mobilised for different types of TEA. Predominantly existing pre-migration weak ties were used for TEA in the country of origin and post-migration weak ties for TEA in third countries. Links to Russian-speaking communities in diasporic nodes outside Germany and professional networks were valuable resources of social capital for TEA in third countries. While informal embedded ties were particularly important if TEA were used as a complementary strategy in the country of origin, TEA only involving third countries (Type III) were characterised by predominantly formal, price-regulated business relationships. Migrants involved in intensive TEA often relied on pre-migration informal ties in country of origin in the beginning of their transnational business career but over time tended to formalise their business networks and favoured price-regulated specialised business relationships.

Some limitations of the study need critical consideration. First, the study is not representative and the findings can therefore not be generalised to migrant entrepreneurs in general in Germany (or to migrant entrepreneurs from the FSU in Germany). Second, it was not possible to integrate network maps in all interviews and systematic analysis of structural network characteristics (e.g. size, density, multiplexity degree) is therefore missing from the study. Furthermore, network maps are a relatively static approach depicting the respondent's network at a certain time point. More advanced approaches or longitudinal studies reflecting dynamics in the business networks would allow a more thorough analysis of networking strategies and their change over time. While the present study primarily focuses on the content of networks, further research applying mixed-method approaches that combine narrative data with structural network data analysis (e.g. Bilecen 2016, Herz et al. 2015) could provide deeper insights in the role of network structure for migrants' businesses and transnational involvement.

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