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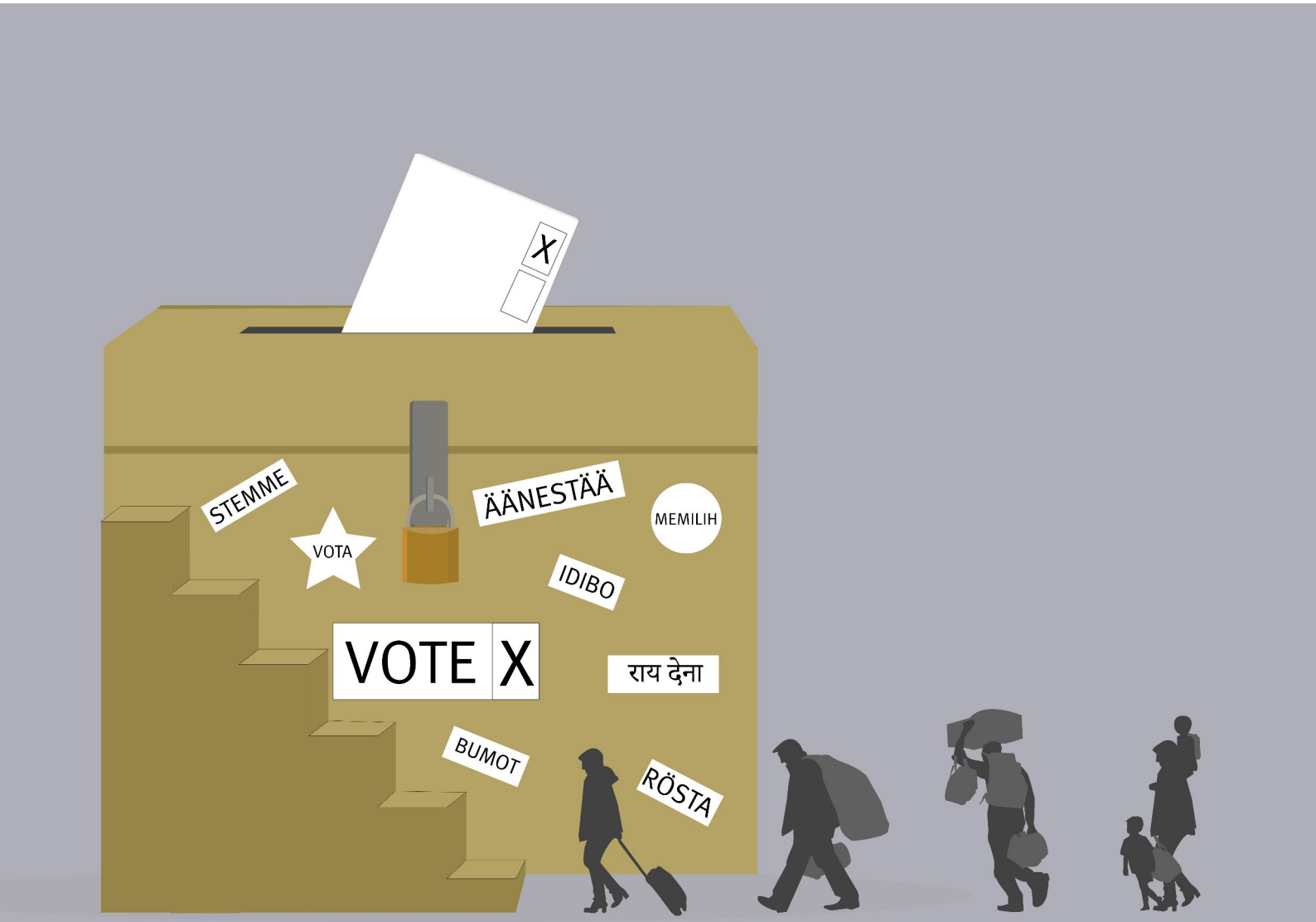

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Contents

Abbreviations

AVR	Afghan Voice Radio
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OCV	Out-of-country voting
ONS	Office for National Statistics
RQA	Return of Qualified Afghans programme

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1. Introduction

This case study examines issues related to the political inclusion of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers based in the United Kingdom, and their ability to participate in the political life and decision-making processes of the UK as host country and Afghanistan as their country of origin. It was written as part of a larger research project on the political participation of refugees (Bekaj and Antara 2018).

The UK is host to over 60,000 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers (ONS 2013). Most of them fled their country during the 1990s civil war, which was followed by six years of Taliban rule, or due to the threat from insurgent groups and insecurity after the US-led coalition enforced regime changes following the events of 11 September 2001. To get a better picture and reach a wider range of interviewees across the UK, qualitative interviews were conducted with 100 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions. Men and women with different political backgrounds and from different ethnic and age groups participated in the interviews carried out for this case study (see Table 1). A large part of the qualitative data gathered for this case study originated from the interviews and focus group discussions with Afghans residing in Greater London, where 70 per cent of the Afghan-born UK-resident population is based (Jones 2010). Additional interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in other cities with large Afghan populations, including Birmingham, Manchester and Peterborough.

Table 1. Case study respondents' profiles and locations

	Afghan		
Research sites	Male	Female	TOTAL
Birmingham	12	3	**15**
London	56	14	**70**
Manchester	11	3	**14**
Peterborough	1	0	**1**
TOTAL			**100**

The participants were Afghans with a refugee background who have acquired British citizenship, Afghans with refugee status or other types of UK residency status and those who are still awaiting a decision on their legal status in the UK. Approximately 20 per cent of the participants were Afghan refugees and asylum seekers who are actively engaged in refugee advocacy activities or are part of the UK's domestic political parties and civil society groups. Twenty of the 100 interviewees were Afghan women refugees and asylum seekers residing in the UK. Women refugees in their 50s with UK citizenship and newly married refugee women in their 20s, some with UK citizenship and some either with refugee status or awaiting a decision on family reunification, were interviewed. The questionnaire around which the interviews were structured contained 22 questions and was available in English, Dari and Pashto. Most of the interviewees preferred to respond in either Dari or Pashto. The selection of participants was based on the researcher's personal contacts, recommendations by Afghan communities and local groups, as well as refugees' and asylum seekers' own direct contacts.

The case study also presents a desk-based overview of the host-country context, such as the number of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, a summary of British refugee and asylum policy, and an overview of the requirements for naturalization and the political rights of refugees. The key findings of the primary data collection, which focused on Afghan refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the UK, discuss the issues of access to citizenship, formal political participation and non-formal political participation. The case study also sheds light on the country of origin context. Using online data and recent studies, policy papers and relevant Afghan laws, it describes the main factors pushing Afghans to leave their country, provides information on the profile and characteristics of the UK-based Afghan refugee diaspora and outlines the legal provisions facilitating or restricting political participation by Afghans in their country of origin. The key findings from the interviews and focus group discussions are presented in relation to the participation of the Afghan diaspora in the political life of Afghanistan. The case study concludes by summarizing the results and making recommendations with regard to refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in their host country and country of origin.

2. Host-country context: the United Kingdom

The foreign-born population of the UK is estimated to be around 8.7 million, which is equivalent to 13.3 per cent of the country's total population (ONS 2016a). The UK's 2015 Annual Population Survey indicates that 1 in 8 of the population was born abroad and 1 in 12 holds a non-British citizenship. Poland (9.5 per cent), India (9 per cent) and Pakistan (5.9 per cent) are the top three countries of birth for migrants. The most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) put annual net migration to the UK at a record high, with 333,000 arrivals in 2016 compared to approximately 200,000 in 2013 (ONS 2016a). Only 41,280 of the 2016 arrivals were asylum seekers; the rest were EU and non-EU citizens moving to the UK for work reasons or to look for a job.

The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford reported in February 2017 that between 1993 and 2015, nearly 40 per cent (3.2 million people) of the UK's foreign-born population lived in London (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva 2017). After London, south-east England, the east of England, the West Midlands and north-west England were areas with the highest concentrations of foreign-born population. Asylum seekers, however, are mostly concentrated in poorer areas of the UK, such as Middlesbrough, Glasgow and Rochdale. In particular, Middlesbrough, a large industrial town in the north-east of England, has a higher proportion of asylum seekers than anywhere else in the country, at one refugee for every 152 people in the city, followed by Glasgow, Rochdale, Cardiff and Stockton-On-Tees (Millar 2016).

The 2011 census analysis by the ONS estimated that there were 63,000 Afghan-born residents in the UK (ONS 2013). The first wave of Afghan asylum seekers came to the UK in the 1980s, fleeing the then pro-Soviet Union Afghan Government. These were mostly educated Afghans. Later, in the period 1990–2000, a greater wave of Afghan migrants came to the UK to escape the country's 1990s civil war and Taliban rule. According to ONS calculations, 30 per cent of Afghans in the UK arrived in the period ending in 2000 (ONS 2013). The collapse of the Taliban regime in the autumn of 2001 was followed by a period of calm. However, the Taliban's resurgence after 2004 led more and more Afghans to flee the threat of violence in their homeland. An ONS survey from 2009 indicated that up to 70 per cent of Afghans were living in London, followed by Birmingham and the West Midlands. The majority of Afghan-born residents in the UK are between 30 and 34 years of age (Jones 2010). The 2009 ONS survey put the number of female Afghans at 20,000 and males at 35,000 (Jones 2010).

Overview of UK's refugee and asylum policy

The British Home Office is responsible for all aspects of immigration and asylum, including applications for leave to remain. Granting leave to remain to an asylum seeker means official recognition as a refugee or permission to stay for 'humanitarian protection' or through 'discretionary leave to remain'. In most such cases, this is granted for a five-year period. After completion of the five-year period, there is an opportunity to apply for indefinite leave to remain (AIDA 2016). Only after spending at least one year with indefinite leave to remain can a person apply for British Citizenship, provided that they meet the residency requirements (Home Office 2017b).

According to the British Home Office the top five asylum seeking nationalities in 2016 were Iranians (4,792 asylum applications), Pakistanis (3,717), Iraqis (3,651), Afghans (3,094) and Bangladeshis (2,234) (ONS 2017). In the previous year, Eritreans and Sudanese (North and South) were at the top of the list, followed by Iranians, Syrians and Pakistanis (ONS 2017). Of the 30,603 asylum applications received in 2016, 8,466 were granted leave to remain, an acceptance rate of asylum applications of 34 per cent at the initial decision stage (Home Office 2017a). Afghanistan was among the top three countries in terms of the success rate for appeals in 2016, at 49 per cent (Home Office 2017a).

Requirements for refugees' political participation and naturalization

Access to citizenship

Once granted asylum or another form of protection, applicants have a long way to go before they can enjoy full rights as British citizens. One year after a refugee has been granted indefinite leave to remain, they can apply for British naturalization. For this they will have to pass the 'Life in the UK' test, meet the English language and 'good character' requirements and pay a GBP 1,282 fee (Home Office n.d.). According to a 2015 survey by the ONS, nearly half of all foreign-born British residents do not hold British citizenship (ONS 2016). Around 5000 Afghans were granted citizenship in 2009 and 5,500 the previous year. Afghan-born residents were the sixth highest represented nationality among those naturalized in 2008 (Jones 2010).

Access to voting rights and political parties

According to British Electoral Law, to be able to vote or stand as a candidate in national, local or municipal elections, a person must be 18 years old, and a British citizen or a Commonwealth or Republic of Ireland citizen living in the UK (Electoral Commission 2017). To be eligible to voter one must be registered at an address in the UK or a British citizen living abroad who has been registered to vote in the UK in the past 15 years, and should not be legally excluded from voting.

European Union (EU) nationals residing in the UK are not eligible to vote in general elections or referendums. However, according to British Electoral Law, EU nationals living in the UK can take part in European Parliament and local elections. British electoral law does not grant the right to vote in any elections to refugees and asylum seekers from non-EU and non-Commonwealth countries. Hence, unlike Commonwealth and EU citizens, Afghans must go through a lengthy naturalization process that takes at least seven years before they can obtain British citizenship, which finally grants them the right to vote.

A survey by the University of Manchester conducted before the May 2015 General Election suggested that there were just under 4 million foreign-born voters across England and Wales eligible to vote in the May 2015 General Election (Ford and Grove-White 2015). This means nearly half the UK's 8.7 million foreign-born residents (ONS 2016) were eligible

to vote. A large number of these non-British born voters were from Commonwealth migrant communities or UK residents from the Irish Republic. According to the survey, despite the large presence of EU nationals, they were under-represented in the May 2015 election as they did not routinely seek to acquire British citizenship. The survey found that a small number of non-Commonwealth countries, such as Turkish- and Somali-born UK residents, were well-represented among migrant potential voters—an estimated 69,000 and 55,000 voters, respectively, from these communities. Settled migrants from these countries were found to be strongly motivated to acquire the full rights of British citizenship, and as a result to possess a strong electoral voice relative to their size (Ford and Grove-White 2015).

Notwithstanding the restrictions on the right to vote facing non-Commonwealth and non-EU migrants, any resident of the UK can become a member of a political party or form a political group. British political parties' requirements for membership vary, and the most 'nationalistic' parties are perhaps surprisingly among the most open to foreign supporters (Ferguson 2015). Some British political parties, such as the Scottish National Party, the UK Independence Party, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats, allow potential members living anywhere in the world to join, regardless of whether they are UK citizens. The Conservative Party only accepts UK residents, but does not require members to hold British citizenship. The Labour Party, which has the highest number of members and highest number of non-British born members, is the strictest with regard to membership. It only admits British or Irish citizens, or residents who have lived in the UK for at least one year (Ferguson 2015).

3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country

The UK has a politically vibrant foreign-born population that is becoming an increasingly important part of the electorate in its general and local elections. In the May 2015 General Election, almost 4 million people (1 in 10 voters in England and Wales) were born overseas, compared with just under 3.5 million at the 2010 General Election (Taylor 2015). Migrant voters were mostly from former Commonwealth countries or the Republic of Ireland. Refugees from non-Commonwealth countries who had become British citizens also participated. According to *The Guardian*, Indian (615,000) and Pakistani (431,000) migrants were the largest section of foreign-born voters in the UK's 2015 General Election, followed by Irish, Bangladeshi and Nigerian migrants (Taylor 2015).

Access to citizenship

Around half of the 100 Afghans who participated in the survey for this case study were naturalized British citizens. As noted above, refugees are required to wait at least seven years before they are eligible to apply for British citizenship. Although the *jus soli* (right of soil) British citizenship laws have traditionally been more open to naturalization compared to countries implementing *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) principles, it could be argued that the UK should now be viewed as an originally *jus soli* country that is now less open to naturalization than other traditional *jus soli* countries, such as the USA and Canada, taking into account all the naturalization requirements for good conduct, language skills, cultural integration and years of residency, as well as the need to navigate complex and expensive application procedures (Blinder 2017).

In particular, the requirement for 'good character' can be a significant barrier to naturalization for refugees who have entered the UK illegally and subsequently apply for asylum. In this regard, a recent study shows that non-compliance with the 'good character' requirement was the main reason for the rejection of citizenship applications in the period 2002–16, rising to 44 per cent of all refusals in 2016 (Blinder 2017).

Furthermore, the language and UK culture knowledge requirements for naturalization seem to pose a greater burden on citizens of poorer, less educated and non-English-speaking countries, and may deter their applications (Ryan 2008). Indeed, a 47.2 per cent pass rate for the Life in the UK and English language tests put Afghanistan at the bottom of the list of nationalities passing the naturalization tests in the period October 2005–July 2007 (Ryan

2008). Afghan women face significant additional challenges. Many among the Afghan-born female, adult UK-resident population were not educated in their home country and face difficulties negotiating a place for themselves in the UK. Language difficulties and multiple pressures on women and girls to behave in a certain way limit their ability to engage in many Afghan and wider community activities (Change Institute 2009). All these pressures and constraints often leave Afghan women isolated until they are eligible to apply for British citizenship. Although reliable data on gender and pass rates is not available, Afghan women are even more likely to struggle with the language and literacy requirements of the naturalization tests (Morrice 2017). This makes it considerably more difficult for most Afghan women to play an active role in the political life of, and further hinders their integration into, the host society.

Formal political participation

The findings of this case study support the fact that there is a growing tendency among naturalized Afghan refugees to engage in local politics and civic activities in their host country. However, voting rights restrictions mean that political participation varies between naturalized Afghan-born UK refugees and those UK-based Afghan-born refugees who are not eligible to vote due to their legal status. Certain interviewees who did not have the right to vote in the UK called it 'systemic discrimination'. As a 70-year-old Afghan with refugee status noted, 'If you can't vote, you can't have a say on issues that directly affect your present and future life' (Afghan male refugee 1, West London, 2017).

Most of the older generation of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed for this study believed that taking part in elections or supporting a political party of their choice would protect or improve their current socio-economic circumstances. In addition, the younger generation of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers saw political integration and civic engagement as a way forward to break into the British socio-political hierarchy and, like other migrant nationalities such as Indians, become decision-makers at the local and national levels in the UK: 'You are only recognized by the size of your voting community and when you are represented in an important political platform' (Afghan male refugee 5, former Labour Party candidate, London, 2017).

Nearly all of the Afghan-born refugees with British citizenship interviewed had voted in the past two elections in the UK and were either supporters or active members of a British political party, usually the Labour Party. However, many of the female Afghan-born British citizens interviewed were either unaware of politics and civic activities in their surrounding areas or too caught up in other aspects of their daily lives, which were mostly based around the home, for politics to be a priority. Having said that, many confirmed that they had voted on election day, but that they were encouraged by a male family member to vote for a particular candidate:

> Afghan women are under the influence of men. Cooking, cleaning and doing household chores is their primary job . . . Their male family members, often their husbands, keep them uninformed and uneducated about social and political matters in their surroundings. Some men feel very insecure if their wives learn about British values or if they try to integrate in the host community.
>
> —Representative of an Afghan union organization, London, 2017

Most of the Afghans in this study came from a conservative background and most Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are Muslims. Integration into the host country's society and acceptance of British values is a daunting task for them. Most of the Afghan

refugee men interviewed, however, stated that taking part in elections was something they took very seriously, particularly for those who depended on government welfare support: 'I voted before going to work. After I finished work and when only a few hours were left before the polls closed, I rushed home and took my wife to the nearest polling station to vote. I asked her to stop cooking and go to vote' (Afghan male refugee 8, taxi driver, Birmingham, 2017).

The Afghan women refugees interviewed, and particularly those who worked within the home, noted that they often learned from family members or relatives that an election was happening just days before the event. One female Afghan refugee stated: 'I don't follow local media. I follow my daughters about what is happening in the world of politics'. She said she used to consult her husband but now consults her daughters about when to vote and who to vote for: 'I always say we should vote for a party that is good for Afghan refugees here and also whoever helps the people of Afghanistan back home' (Afghan female refugee 1, West London, 2017).

The UK does not currently have any Afghan-born members of parliament or elected local councillors. Nonetheless, there are many Afghan refugees across the UK who are full members of a political party and some have stood as candidates for political parties in local council elections. Many Afghans, like other middle class Asian migrant communities, favour the Labour Party (BBC News 2015). However, according to Harun Mehdi, an Afghan member of the Conservative Party, the party has gained support in some Afghan circles during the current Conservative government and the previous coalition. Mehdi is an Afghan-born British citizen and an active member of the Conservative Party. He was one of the three nominees to stand in the internal Conservative Party nomination process for a seat on Richmond borough council and lost by a 'very slim' margin.

As she prepared her door-to-door campaign for a Labour Party candidate in a north-west London borough during the June 2017 Generation Election, a 24-year old Afghan Labour Party member argued that: 'You are only as dominant as the size of your politically active community; you only matter if you are seen as a good-sized community of potential voters'. Her advice for eligible Afghan refugee voters was that: 'Our individual or common problems can only be heard and addressed by a local MP if he or she is convinced that we can deliver him or her votes when it is needed.' She added:

> Afghan refugees' mentality towards British elections has improved quite a lot. Five years ago, when I was running for local council elections in this borough, people were not even prepared to listen to me when I knocked on their doors. Although I did not earn enough votes to win that time, my appearance changed their minds…. The second generation of Afghan refugees is far more vibrant and interested in politics now.
>
> —Afghan female refugee 2, former Labour Party candidate, London, 2017

Like this Labour Party activist, most of the participants who were members of political parties were in their 20s or 30s, which means that they were too young to participate in any political activities during the civil war or Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The head of an Afghan refugee support organization interviewed said that due to the unpleasant experiences they had had back home, such as imprisonment, assassination and harassment of members of certain political parties and politicians, the older generation of Afghan refugees often feels that supporting a political party could have dire consequences even in the UK (Representative of an Afghan union organization, London, 2017). Thus, many older Afghans are reluctant to directly engage with political parties.

Interestingly, those who came from a politically active background in their country of origin seemed keenest to find their way into British politics. Most of those interviewed who were active members of a political party in the UK noted they had had a family background of engagement in politics back home: 'My dad was a politician back in Afghanistan. I have grown up with politics and believe in active political lobbying rather than a passive attitude' (Afghan male refugee 6, online political activist, London, 2017).

Unlike those who were 50 or over, those under 35 seemed to be more involved in British politics. For instance, Paimana Asad was 3-years old when she left Afghanistan and came to the UK with her parents. She was brought up in England and is now an active Labour Party member in Harrow, north London. In an interview with BBC News Persian before the 2015 General Election, she said that it was the lack of attention paid to Afghan refugees by local authorities that politicized her: 'Afghan politics are leader-centric but British politics are more party-centric. Therefore, political practices do not make sense for older Afghans here. A lack of interest in and exposure to home politics has helped the younger generation of refugees and asylum seekers show a greater interest in host country politics' (BBC News Persian 2015).

The fact that refugees and asylum seekers can join a political party even without the right to take part in elections means a lot to many refugees. It has provided a basis for the exercise of their political rights for many of the participants to this study. One interviewee who came to the UK as a teenager and has yet to be naturalized stated that those deprived of voting rights could still achieve what a voter might simply by joining a political party: 'I may be deprived of my right to vote but as an active member of the party of my choice whose manifesto has been discussed with me, I campaign and earn so many votes for the party. The main goal is to make the party win' (Afghan male refugee 5, member of British Labour Party, Manchester, 2017).

Non-formal political participation

Afghan refugees and asylum seekers are engaged in various non-formal means of political participation in the UK, from staging or attending demonstrations, to the formation of arts and cultural unions, trade union branches, or online and social media political platforms. One reason for this could be that this type of platform often does not require members to have legal status or British citizenship in order to subscribe or participate (Staniewicz 2015). For the Afghan refugees, informal civil society and political gatherings in the form of cultural and literary associations, refugee rights advocacy groups, charities or ethnic associations are common spaces where naturalized and non-naturalized refugees, as well as asylum seekers take part on a single platform and advocate for a common cause. Cultural and literary unions in particular are more popular among refugee groups. Small and run by Afghans for Afghans, they present a unique opportunity for older and younger generations of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to gather in one place. Some of these entities are not even formally registered and operate with a low profile by gathering for cultural, literary or political discussions. Other more regular groups, such as fundraising, advocacy and lobbying entities, are registered in England and Wales either as charities or as Community Interest Companies, which are social enterprises that use their profits and assets for the public good. If an entity's annual income is less than GBP 5,000, there is usually no need to register as a union or community group (Community Impact Bucks 2017).

Trade unions are also a useful platform where professional and skilled refugees can find help and support to further their professional interests. However, some practical barriers limit the opportunities for non-professional migrants, due to the nature of their work or their place of residence (Staniewicz 2015). Some trade unions have more relaxed and open membership policies, and even accept asylum seekers. For example, the National Union of

Journalists allows membership for UK-based asylum seekers who are prevented by law from working in the UK, and they are not required to pay subscriptions (National Union of Journalists 2017).

London offers opportunities for many lobby groups and rights activists to organize protests in which everyone, even asylum seekers, can participate. The type of demonstrations Afghan refugees usually take part in are either pro-refugee rights or to denounce certain countries' involvement in Afghanistan, particularly neighbouring Iran and Pakistan which are accused of involvement in the current Afghan conflict: 'Britain is the best place to draw attention to and create international pressure on the countries involved in Afghanistan's conflict, such as Iran and Pakistan' (Afghan male refugee 4, former Afghan Minister, London, 2017).

Most of these demonstrations take place in London, and it seems that protest is more a practice of choice for asylum seekers than for refugees and migrants with legal status. Those interviewees with British citizenship appeared to be the least interested in taking part in protests. They claimed to be too busy and that protests initiated by Afghan refugees were 'too disorganized' and often suffered from a very low turnout. In addition, for some Afghan refugees taking part in demonstrations is a big commitment. One, a 30-year old Afghan with refugee status, said that attending demonstrations meant huge travel costs and for many giving up at least one day's income. Apart from the financial constraints, there were other reasons that made attending protests a difficult choice for some refugees and asylum seekers:

> Refugees and asylum seekers fear they might be arrested or the demonstration may get out of control and their presence on a demonstration could affect the Home Office decision on their asylum application. They have inherited this fear from back home. . . . We organized a Refugees Welcome March and tens of thousands of people participated, but only 25 per cent of the attendees were refugees
>
> —Afghan male refugee 3, activist, Manchester, 2017

Another dominant issue singled out by the vast majority of interviewees was the lack of awareness among refugees and asylum seekers of their civic and political rights, both naturalized refugees and those who had not yet obtained British citizenship. In particular, they acknowledged that they came from a country with little to no experience of democracy. Hence, having to integrate into a very old democracy with a rich and diverse political system would not be possible unless proper civic education was provided. In this regard, an Afghan refugee who is a member of the Labour party, was just 12 when he came to the UK but is not yet naturalized, highlighted that there should be early intervention to inform and encourage refugees to learn about the host country's political system and the different mechanisms for political participation:

> In the early months and years after arrival, refugees and asylum seekers have more time and more motivation [to learn] about integration into the host country's civic and political community. Years of disengagement due to lack of voting rights isolates them and even after they have obtained British citizenship, the system would sound alien to them.
>
> —Afghan male refugee 9, Manchester, 2017

The lengthy, complex and expensive procedures required to ensure their legal status in the UK in the years before becoming eligible to apply for citizenship were also flagged by certain participants as a deterrent factor that draws their attention away from 'less urgent' aspects of

life in the host country, such as political participation. According to an Afghan refugee who came to the UK in 2005 and had to wait two years before he was eligible to apply for naturalization:

> Our top priority is to learn and be updated about how the Home Office system works with regard to our legal status. In fact, for about ten years until we become British citizens, we go through the labyrinth of immigration red tape and the submission of application after application to keep up our legal status. Therefore, we never have a chance to think about other aspects of life here.
>
> —Afghan male refugee 7, focus group discussion, Birmingham, 2017

Another obstacle to Afghan refugees' political participation that emerged was lack of funding. A representative of an NGO working on issues related to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK told how while there is interest from public and private bodies in funding integration projects for refugees, such as social and cultural activities, public awareness projects aimed at improving civic and political participation by refugees and asylum seekers, which are equally crucial for integration into to British society, are rarely backed by public and private donors and have never been recognized as an important aspect of integration (Representative of Paiwand Afghan Association, London, 2017).

The interviews conducted for the purposes of this case study reveal that most of those who have come to the UK in the past 10 years were either born after or just children in September 2001. They are young and most are educated or can at least read and write in their own language. This generation is also very active on social media, and can therefore be informed about gatherings, demonstrations or other campaigns conducted for and by refugees and asylum seekers. It is worth highlighting that UK-based Afghan social media users, mostly young refugees and even asylum seekers with no legal status, were campaigning for the Labour Party by sharing the party's campaign messages and urging UK-based eligible Afghan voters to vote Labour in the 2017 general elections. (The Labour Party is seen as a pro-migrant party.) An Afghan refugee interviewed, who is also a YouTube blogger, stated that when he came to the UK three years before, he was disappointed to learn that as an asylum seeker and even as a refugee with legal status he would not be able to vote. He therefore sought alternative means of participation in the democratic process:

> It is sad I do not have the right to vote in this country but I can't wait a decade to take part in the democratic process. There are many other platforms here—besides casting a vote—to practice democracy.
>
> —Afghan male refugee 2, exiled writer, London, 2017

As the conflict is still ongoing in their country of origin, the older generation of Afghans and those born and raised in Afghanistan are more interested and involved in debates around politics there than in British politics: 'Home politics dominate most of our dining table discussions; so much so that often a "no mobile phones and no home politics talk" rule is enforced by the women at the table before dinner is served' (Afghan male refugee 10, Birmingham, 2017).

According to the London-based Afghan Voice Radio (AVR), a web-based radio station run by Afghans for Afghans in the UK and beyond, Afghans in the UK who are not eligible to vote but are interested in activism or politics take part in conventional, political and social gatherings. Sources at AVR noted there are 12 Afghan community and social groups in Greater London and the Midlands, mostly organizing cultural gatherings, poetry nights and

national festival celebrations (AVR representative, London, 2017). These groups also advocate for migrants' rights and offer support to newly arrived migrants. Given the recent challenges faced by Syrian refugees, some Afghan activists have also been taking part in demonstrations in London supporting the cause of Syrian refugees (AVR representative, London, 2017).

4. Country-of-origin context: Afghanistan

Afghanistan's insecurity, poor governance and economy are compelling migration 'determinants' for the tens of thousands of people who leave the country, far more compelling than the 'pull factors' of Europe (Alexander 2016). These factors have been the prime reasons for Afghan emigration for the past four decades. The international relief effort and development interventions in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 have not brought about meaningful change in the conflict-affected country: 'Similar to other fragile states, insecurity and poor governance hinder nearly every aspect of life. The wider-reaching state-building approach, focused on government institutions, delivery of basic services and protection of basic human rights, is also failing to deliver the desired results (Alexander 2016).

Afghanistan has been experiencing increased volatility and levels of violent conflict since 2014. Over 100,000 foreign troops left the country at the end of 2014, which gave strength to the waning Taliban and created a breeding ground for affiliates of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan. People face increasing poverty and unemployment, on the one hand, and threats of violence from the anti-government forces that controlled over 30 per cent of Afghan territory in mid-2017, on the other (Smith 2017). While the liveable space is getting tighter, major cities such as Kabul and Mar-e-sharif in the north that were previously deemed safe are now experiencing frequent deadly attacks.

Nearly half of Afghanistan's population of around 30 million is under the age of 15 (Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2013–14). Unlike the 1980s and 1990s, when mostly adult Afghans and their families fled the country due to the ongoing war and political tension, a significant proportion of Afghan refugees and migrants are young men escaping the conflict. They hope to secure an income for their families back home, and seek opportunities for a safe and stable future for themselves. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2015—the country's most violent year since the fall of the Taliban—more than 250,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe from Afghanistan, second only to Syrians (UNHCR 2015).

The majority of the migrants escaping to Europe from Afghanistan are single, educated young men from urban areas. Back home, most of them were working for international aid agencies or employed by Afghanistan-based NATO forces across the country (Alexander 2016). Many of them are from the generation that after the fall of the Taliban, had an opportunity to go to school and even university in their home towns. Many hoped that this generation would bring prosperity to the war-torn nation. However, given current

emigration trends, although slower than in 2015, Afghanistan is fast losing its best and brightest and thus its potential for a flourishing future.

The vast majority of Afghans are Sunni Muslims. Of the ethnicities found in Afghanistan, the majority of Pashtuns, Tajiks and Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims. Conversely, those of Hazara ethnicity are Shi'a Muslims who were actively persecuted by the Taliban regime, leading many to flee the country (Jones 2010). Afghanistan also has minority religious groups such as Sikhs and Hindus, many of whom have been discriminated against and left the country. The majority of Afghans in the UK are Sunni Muslims of Pashtun or Tajik ethnicities, followed by Uzbeks and a smaller number of other ethnic groups, but there is a significant minority of Shi'a religious groups too, particularly those from the Hazara ethnic group (Change Institute 2009). There are also reported to be some 'important Sufi families in London and a large Afghan Sikh community in Southall and other parts of Middlesex [north London]' (Change Institute 2009).

The UK is host to Afghan refugees with various political affiliations, such as supporters of the Western-backed Mujahideen who escaped the pro-communist regime of the 1980s, as well as a large number of the regime's officials and affiliates who escaped the country following the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime. The latter first escaped to Central Asian countries and eventually found their way to the UK. In the 1990s, as civil war erupted, civilians and scores of affiliates of all seven factions that were fighting against each other ended up in the UK.

5. Refugee diasporans' political participation in their country of origin

Formal political participation

Despite the fact that millions of its citizens are living in exile, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan does not have any concrete policies on emigration or its diaspora (Weinar 2014). The primary focus of the Afghan Government and its international partners, such as the UNHCR and other refugee agencies, is on the return and permanent reintegration of Afghan refugees from neighbouring countries. In the past three presidential and parliamentary elections, no voting mechanism was considered for Afghan nationals living in Europe (Afghanistan Independent Elections Commission 2014).

The Independent Elections Commission did consider out-of-country voting (OCV) for the millions of Afghan refugees living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran in the historic first democratic elections in 2004 (Shams and Khan 2014). However, even for those refugees, there was no mechanism for voting in the two most recent presidential elections of 2009 and 2014 (Shams and Khan 2014). The 2016 Election Law (article 5 (5)) states that refugees 'have the right to participate in elections, if possible, in separate polling centers established by the Independent Elections Commission'. However, as of March 2018, no arrangements had been made for OCV for refugees in the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018.

Prior to the 2004 elections, an Emergency Loya Jirga or 'grand assembly' was elected in 2002 to elect a transitional government, and a Constitutional Loya Jirga was elected in 2003 to adopt Afghanistan's first post-conflict constitution. Although these bodies were not formed on the basis of direct elections, a consultation mechanism involving the UK-based Afghan refugee diaspora was implemented. A participant with British citizenship recalls:

> In 2002, the Afghan Embassy in London had organized some sort of an election mechanism to elect an Afghan diaspora delegate to represent Afghan refugees residing in the UK in Afghanistan's Constitutional Loya Jirga. . . . I was one of two nominees and Afghan refugees were invited to the embassy to vote to choose one.
>
> —Afghan male refugee 1, West London, 2017

Political participation by Afghan-born UK residents in their country of origin is linked to their legal status in the UK, but this is not due to Afghan law. In fact, the Afghan Embassy in London recognizes anyone with an Afghan National ID card as an Afghan citizen regardless of whether they are an asylum seeker, a refugee or an Afghan with British citizenship (Afghan Embassy in London n.d.). However, a UK refugee visa, which is often valid for five years, restricts its holder from travelling to their country of origin. When Afghan asylum seekers are granted refugee status or another form of protection, they are usually issued with the UN Convention travel document, which allows travel to any country except for their country of origin (Reiss Edwards 2017). As a result, Afghans with UK travel documents, which clearly state their refugee status, are banned from travelling to Afghanistan. Therefore, until they have obtained British citizenship, UK-based Afghan refugees cannot travel to their country of origin and thus cannot play any direct role in domestic politics in Afghanistan.

The same restrictions apply when it comes to formal political activities such as standing as a candidate or establishing a political party in Afghanistan. The 2009 Political Parties Law allows Afghan citizens of voting age to freely establish a political party provided that its 'headquarters and any regional offices . . . [are] located in Afghanistan' (article 7). This means that, in order to run, establish or become a member of an Afghan political party, you have to be physically present in Afghanistan.

However, once granted British citizenship, many British Afghans have returned to Afghanistan to take up senior positions in the government and political institutions. According to Afghan law, Afghans with dual nationality living in Afghanistan can stand for parliament and in provincial council elections or work as civil servants. Those who want to be nominated for a ministerial position or run in presidential elections are required to renounce their foreign citizenship before their application for nomination can be considered (Afghanistan Independent Elections Commission 2014).

After the fall of the Taliban there was a tendency to participate in the political and governance affairs of Afghanistan among the Afghan diaspora in the West. To this end, several initiatives were created to facilitate repatriation. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began helping Afghans residing abroad to return, and facilitated their placement in key governmental and non-governmental institutions under the Return of Qualified Afghans (RQA) programme (IOM 2008). According to the IOM, just over 500 highly qualified Afghan refugees, including 32 from the UK, were helped to return home to help government and democratic institutions with post-conflict reconstruction projects.

The RQA helped skilled Afghans in the diaspora to access senior positions in the government and in non-governmental institutions in their home country. In particular, former RQA beneficiaries went on to hold very high-level positions in Afghanistan, including among others a former Deputy President of Afghanistan, a former Minister of Justice, a former Chief of the Supreme Court and a former Minister of the Interior (IOM 2008).

The focus of the IOM's project has now shifted to assisting with the repatriation of qualified Afghan refugees based in Iran. This initiative has been encouraged by international actors to involve the Afghan diaspora in reconstruction efforts. For instance, the World Bank established a USD 1.5 million grant to provide competitive salaries to professionals from the diaspora who return to work in Afghanistan (Democratic Progress Institute 2014). Another example is the 'Return of Qualified Nationals' project by the IOM launched nearly a decade ago, which was also popular and attracted many Afghans in exile to return home temporarily to take part in the democratization of Afghanistan (DPI 2014).

Even without repatriation assistance, Afghanistan before the end of 2014 was considered an ideal destination for many UK-based highly qualified and educated Afghan refugees. The international community, led by the United States, has poured in more than USD 100 billion in aid in the past decade to reconstruct Afghanistan and rebuild its unbalanced

economy. Foreign aid created a unique opportunity for Western experts, particularly Afghans with Western citizenship, to work as advisers to the US backed Afghan Government or even run contractor companies and other development and governance initiatives in Afghanistan. According to one interviewee, since 2005 many UK-based Afghan refugees with good qualifications have made their way home to try to place themselves in key government positions or stand in parliamentary or provincial council elections (Afghan male refugee 4, former Afghan Minister, London, 2017). Under the 2016 Electoral Law (articles 39, 40), Afghan refugees returning home can keep their dual citizenship status as MPs, provincial or district council members or government officials below ministerial rank.

Professionals among the Afghan refugees interviewed for this case study said it was hard for highly qualified Afghan refugees to find a place in the UK's professional institutions as they lacked experience and professional contacts. They therefore still considered Afghanistan to be a good place to expand their expertise and gain civic and political experience. One Afghan former refugee who had been providing interpreting services in the UK and now leads an independent research and analysis organization in Afghanistan noted that: 'At this very moment many Western-returned Afghan refugees, including some from the UK, are working in Afghanistan's leading governmental departments and civil society organizations, including election bodies and corruption prevention institutions' (Afghan naturalized male refugee 11, London, 2017).

Non-formal political participation

Social media, particularly Facebook and YouTube, have become increasingly popular in Afghanistan since 2012, with the expansion of 3G Internet to rural areas and the growing popularity of Facebook in the country (*Kabul Times* 2016). This has enabled Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to participate in non-formal and indirect political activities in their country of origin. Almost all the Afghan respondents said that they follow their country of origin's politics very closely on social media. Some argued that now they are beyond the reach of threats and intimidation, they can express their views freely about political developments back home. There are many examples of social media lobbying for specific leaders or political parties in Afghanistan by UK-based Afghan refugees. Such initiatives are often not initiated by the political parties in Afghanistan, but put together voluntarily by diaspora sympathetic to a particular leader or party.

It seems that non-formal political engagement by Afghan refugees and asylum seekers on social media platforms is not limited to routine individual streaming. According to the AVR, on the eve of Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election a group of Afghan refugees based in the UK used a multimedia platform that included Google Talk, Twitter and Facebook to create an international debate among educated Afghan refugees under the rubric of a 'National Compact' (Ghani 2013). According to one participant in the National Compact debate:

> The group started live discussions with Ashraf Ghani, one of the then presidential nominees who is now the President of Afghanistan. One of the main organizers of this unique Afghan diaspora discussion was later picked by President Ghani and appointed to a very high government position in Afghanistan. Technology helped us go beyond the barriers of refugee life'.
>
> —Young refugee and participant in the National Compact, London, 2017

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Afghan refugees and asylum seekers are deprived of the right to vote in both their host country and their country of origin. In the former case, this is for a period of at least seven years, until they acquire British citizenship. Nonetheless, they have found alternative ways to make their voices heard and participate in the civic and political life of the UK and Afghanistan. The use of social media and online platforms, especially by the younger generation of Afghan refugees, has played an important role in keeping up to date with political developments in their country of origin and engaging in political debates in both the UK and Afghanistan. This study found a growing tendency among Afghan refugees and asylum seekers for civic and political participation in the British political arena. Almost all the interviewees saw an understanding of their host country's political system as a very important element of integration into British society. The generation of Afghan refugees who arrived in the UK after September 2001 is also much more interested and engaged in British politics than those who came to the UK in the 1980s or 1990s. A lack of interest in host country politics is much more likely among older refugees and asylum seekers who fled to the UK at an older age. The interest of people over 50 in the politics of their country of origin reflects the fact that stepping into a new political world is highly complex.

There are also significant and persistent barriers to civic and political inclusion for Afghan refugee women in particular. Apart from those born or brought up in the host country, the vast majority of female respondents were either not interested in civil society and political participation or did not consider it to be one of their priorities. Traditional barriers, cultural complexities and often too many household-related tasks kept Afghan women away from participation in civic and political life. From staging or attending demonstrations, to the formation of arts and cultural unions, trade unions or online and social media platforms, most Afghan-born, British citizen refugees and asylum seekers are connected to a self-organized unregistered group or digital platform, through which they engage with host country and country of origin affairs. Even in these groups and get-togethers, however, the presence of women is rare.

Among the positive elements were the openness of British political parties' and civil society organizations' membership criteria, which makes it possible for refugees and asylum seekers to pursue various forms of participation in civic and political life beyond the right to vote. For Afghan refugees, informal civil society and political gatherings in the form of cultural and literary associations, refugee rights advocacy groups, charities or ethnic associations are common spaces where naturalized and non-naturalized refugees, as well as asylum seekers can take part in a single platform and advocate for a common cause.

The findings of this case study show that Afghan-born, UK-based refugees and asylum seekers have a great interest in country of origin politics. However, due to the lack of OCV mechanisms, they cannot formally participate in Afghan politics unless they travel to Afghanistan, which is not an option for those with refugee status, as travel to their country of origin would entail revocation of that status. Against this background, issues related to the political life of Afghanistan are usually addressed through informal gatherings, and movements of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. There are also plenty of small foundations fundraising for development back home, such as funding schools, clinics and help for individuals to kick start businesses.

Recommendations

For the host country

- British legislators should consider expanding the right to vote in local elections to resident non-citizens from non-EU and non-Commonwealth countries. This would enable Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to participate in formal electoral processes and political decision-making at the local level.
- The UK's immigration authorities and civil society organizations should adopt policies and measures to increase awareness of civil and political rights among newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, including civic education programmes targeting refugee women.
- Local authorities and civil society in the UK should implement joint programmes to inform and encourage refugees to learn about the host country's political system and the different mechanisms for political participation. Few asylum seekers or refugees know about the non-formal means for political participation in their host country. Such programmes would encourage political participation and political integration from an early stage.
- Political parties and candidates should make more efforts to reach out to refugees and asylum seekers. As the case study shows, even if refugees and asylum seekers are not eligible to vote, they can mobilize eligible voters in their communities and provide support to the campaigns of political parties or candidates.

For the country of origin

- Afghanistan and donors supporting Afghanistan's presidential and parliamentary elections should consider organizing OCV through Afghan embassies around the world in the upcoming elections.
- Afghan diaspora organizations and civil society should consider the establishment of alternative platforms for dialogue and engagement in the country's politics. This would encourage highly skilled and motivated members of the Afghan diaspora to contribute to the rebuilding of their home country.

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Annex. Glossary of terms

Asylum

A form of protection given by a state on its territory based on internationally or nationally recognized refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in her or his country of nationality and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Asylum seeker

A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than her or his own and is awaiting a decision on an application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.

Country of origin

A country from which people leave to settle abroad permanently or temporarily (IOM 2011).

Diaspora

A group of individuals (and members of networks, associations and communities) who have left their country of origin but maintain links with their homeland. This concept covers more settled communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the nationality of the host country, dual nationals, and second- and third-generation migrants.

Formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, formal political participation is understood as participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties and parliaments.

Host country

The country where a refugee is settled. In the case of asylum seekers, the country where a person has applied for asylum.

Internally displaced person

A person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular because of (or in order to avoid) the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-induced

disasters, but who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights 1998).

Migrant

Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from her/his habitual place of residence, regardless of (a) the person's legal status; (b) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (c) what the causes for the movement are; or (d) what the length of the stay is (IOM 2011).

Naturalization

Granting by a state of its nationality to a non-national through a formal act on the application of the individual concerned (IOM 2011).

Non-formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, non-formal political participation is understood as participation in political affairs through non-formal means, such as civil society organizations, trade unions, consultative bodies, community organizations, grassroots movements and so on.

Refugee

'A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Refugee Convention, article 1A(2), 1951). In addition, article 1(2) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention defines a refugee as any person compelled to leave her or his country 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality'. Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration states that refugees also include persons who flee their country 'because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' (IOM 2011).

Resettlement

The transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another state that has agreed to admit them (IOM 2011).

Transnationalism

The process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders (IOM 2011).

About the authors

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His interests and expertise lie in reporting the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. In the past five years he has travelled extensively to host countries and countries of origin along the route South Asian migrants take when travelling to Turkey and Europe to make reports and documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4 television.

Lina Antara is a democracy support professional with a keen interest in electoral processes and human rights. She has worked as a Programme Officer at International IDEA since 2015, focusing on projects related to the political inclusion of marginalized groups. Previously, she worked with International IDEA's electoral support project in Myanmar, and with the Electoral Processes Programme conducting research for the Electoral Justice Database and the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. Prior to this, she worked for the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Parliament in Luxembourg. She also served as an election observer with the Organization of American States in Panama in 2014 and with the European Union in Liberia in 2017. She holds a master's degree in European law from the University of Luxembourg, a postgraduate degree in international election observation and electoral assistance from the University of the Basque Country, and a bachelor's degree in law from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project

Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host countries and their countries of origin, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time becoming part of their host society. Recognizing the dual role of refugees as political actors, the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities related to the political participation of refugees in their host countries and countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the project explores issues of access to citizenship in host countries, electoral rights in both host countries and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, acknowledging that political life is not only confined to electoral processes, the project examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

In 2018 the project produced a report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, which draws on eight case studies carried out through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees and key informants in host countries with high numbers of refugees. It offers cross-country insights into the experiences of refugee communities originating from five of the largest source countries.

The Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Download the case studies and the full report:
<https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/migration-democracy>

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<http://www.idea.int>

Drawing on individual perspectives of Afghan refugees in the United Kingdom, this case study explores the formal and non-formal political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and the ways in which they are able to participate in peacebuilding and democracy-building in their countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the case study explores issues of access to citizenship in the host country, electoral rights in both the host country and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, it examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

This case study is part of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project and has informed the development of a longer report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, published by International IDEA in 2018.

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