

Critical Approaches to Transit Migration

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the subject of this special issue and presents the papers that follow. It traces the origins of the label ‘transit migration’ to discussions of what was called the ‘new migration’ in the early 1990s. These migrations related to the particular geopolitical context at the end of the Cold War. Though they established the pre-emptive rationale whereby concern is focused as much on *potential* migration as on actual movement, there have been four substantial changes since then. As the geopolitical context has changed, so has the geographies of migration, with a general shift of attention from east-west to south-north; the technological supports of migration have improved, allowing migrants easier, cheaper access to different routes; the categories of migrant have proliferated and finally similar movements may be observed all over the world though only those in the vicinity of Europe are labelled as ‘transit’. This leads us to a critical stance around the term ‘transit’ that is common to all papers in this special issue. Nevertheless, despite the problematic term, there is something worthy of attention amongst these new developments around the fringes of Europe.

Keywords: transit migration, Europe, undocumented migration, migration policy

Overland or maritime migrations around the periphery of Europe began to receive attention as part of the ‘new migration’ to Europe that was widely discussed in the 1990s (Koser and Lutz, 1999). One of the key elements of novelty of these migrations was the ‘new geography’ of migration to Europe, in which significant East-West movement began to alter a system that had previously been dominated by links between European countries, and former colonies or ‘guestworker’ sending countries (King, 1993). A new terminology of ‘transit migration’ was quickly incorporated into discussions in an attempt to describe an important part of broader changes in patterns of migration within and around the borders of Europe (Wallace *et al.*, 1996).

Under this categorisation ‘transit migration’ has become a central element of the growing complexity and diversity of European migrations, partly in response to increasing restrictions on legal migration and intensified border controls since the 1990s (de Haas, 2008a). This included an increasing importance of overland and maritime migration of migrants originating from an increasingly diverse array of Eastern Mediterranean, Asian and African countries, who, on their way to European Union countries, travelled through countries located on the ‘fringe’ of the European Union in North Africa, Turkey and Eastern Europe.

While the terminology of transit migration has persisted in discussions of migration to Europe, the nature of transit migration as well as the meaning, usefulness and appropriateness of the concept itself has remained unsettled and highly contested. These issues form the focus of this special issue. First, this introduction identifies the main geopolitical contextual changes that have occurred in relation to migration to Europe. Second, it turns to the major themes of the special issue, the conceptualisation and categorisation of continuous migration. And third, it provides an overview of the six papers that follow.

NEW, NEWER, NEWEST: GEOPOLITICAL CHANGE IN AND AROUND THE EUROPEAN SPACE

The 'new migration' became shorthand for a particular conception of migration in the 1990s, rather than a consistent claim of novelty. It linked particular, often anticipated, patterns of migration to the break-up of the former USSR, 'new wars' and subsequent changes to the world order. This period also witnessed the entry of migration into the domain of high politics, as a cause for significant political concern and the emergence of European, perhaps even global migration politics (Düvell, 2005). Typically, public fears about potential large-scale movements, or 'migration pressure' were more significant than the reality of migration itself in influencing the geopolitical environment. Claims by journalists and politicians that many millions of people were 'on their way' to Western Europe were wildly exaggerated, but such ideas have an impact on how migration is perceived and dealt with in the political domain nonetheless. This kind of historical perspective is relevant when considering the current growing intensity of migration controls in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe.

Contemporary political concerns are also focused primarily at the perceived potential for uncontrolled movement, mainly associated with refugee and irregular migration. However, several misconceptions and an overall lack of conceptual clarity have haunted the scholarly debate on irregular migration. For instance, it is particularly important to distinguish between irregular migration and irregular stay. It is well established that only a small proportion (existing studies suggest between five and ten percent) of all irregular migrants *enter* the EU in a clandestine manner, as opposed to overstaying on visas

(i.e. Collyer, 2008; de Haas, 2008a; Düvell, 2009). And even amongst all irregular border-crossing into Europe, 'transit migration' accounts for a relatively small share of arrivals.

Yet transit migration goes far beyond those individuals who actually arrive. Terms such as *potential* migration and *migration pressure* (Giubilaro, 1997; Lucas, 2006; Plewa, 2007) have been progressively incorporated into the conceptualisation of irregular migration and seemingly justify increasing control operations to prevent people reaching European territory (Betts and

Milner, 2006; Lutterbeck, 2006). For instance, the budget for Frontex, the European border control organisation established in 2005, which is partly responsible for these operations has grown from 19 million euros in 2006 to 70 million euros in 2008 (Frontex, 2009). This conceptualisation also contributes to the erroneous idea that all migrants in countries on Europe's 'fringe' are 'in transit' to Europe. For instance, claims by the Italian minister of the interior in June 2003 that 1.5–2 million Africans were waiting in Libya to illegally cross to Europe (Boubakri, 2006) totally ignore the fact that Libya is an important migration destination in its own right (de Haas, 2008a). All too often, alarmist images of hordes of migrants on their way to Europe associated with regular maritime tragedies and collective attempts to scale border fences often take on a life of their own and are transformed into self-referential 'facts' cited over and over again in the media, policy discourses, and academic studies.

Yet beyond the concern with potential irregular movement, the context in which transit migration must now be considered is more complex than that of the 'new migration' in which it was first discussed. First, the patterns of migrations to Europe are constantly changing; thus, we can identify ever 'newer' geographies of European migration. In broad terms, concerns about migration from the East have been supplemented and partially overridden by concerns about migration from the South, though this simple characterisation hides a more complex picture. The EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 shifted the EU's eastern border and altered broader geopolitical realities in the region. Also, non-EU Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and virtually all southern and eastern Mediterranean countries are increasingly integrated into the EU's political sphere through the Council of Europe, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), regional Stability Pacts and free trade agreements (Avci and Kirisci, 2008; Düvell, this issue).

In comparison to the widely mediatised migration from African countries, migration from CEE and CIS countries has aroused less concern, apparently for two reasons. First, migrants from these countries tend to be non-Muslims and are phenotypically less distinct from the majority populations of Western Europe. Or, as a senior representative of the UK Foreign Office argued

at a high level meeting of German and UK officials in Berlin in 2006, these migrants (sic) 'blend in easily'.¹ In other words, race and religion are considered less of an issue. Second, for these and other migrants from more distant countries there are fewer fatal incidents at the borders, so the humanitarian issues attract less attention.

During the late 1990s, Turkey became a country through which refugees from Iran, Iraq and migrants from countries as distant as Somalia and Bangladesh travelled to get to the EU. This is mostly addressed within the EU accession process. Migration across the EU's southern and south-eastern borders began to attract attention in the early 1990s, but it took the attempts by groups of migrants to scale the border fences of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in north Morocco in October 2005 and widely mediated deaths at sea in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Adriatic sea to dramatically shift the EU focus southwards (de Haas, 2006; Collyer, 2007).

The EU's 'Global Approach' to migration was first outlined in December 2005 as a direct result of concerns arising from events in Ceuta and Melilla and it initially focused exclusively on relations between Europe and Africa. This focus was expanded at the end of 2007, principally to incorporate perspectives on migration from the Balkans but the Africa-Europe axis remains important in terms of control operations and the intensity of various international processes (Collyer, 2009). So far, Frontex has concentrated its operations almost solely on the southern borders of the EU; major activities in the East, notably in Ukraine only commenced in 2009. According to Frontex data approximately 152,000 apprehensions of irregular immigrants were made in 2009, of which 67,000 were at sea, in the Mediterranean and Atlantic (Frontex, 2009). This illustrates the significance accorded to irregular migration into Europe from the South.

The organisation of Frontex operations indicates three important yet distinct sections of Europe's external border: the East, South East and South. Those entering tend to come from distinct backgrounds; for instance, Eritreans and Malians are reported to travel through Libya, Mauritians and Bengalis through Turkey and Somalis and Pakistanis through Ukraine. Interceptions data, however, are a poor indication of irregular migration; they reflect the intensity of

migration control operations, the efficiency of border crossing strategies as much as the intensity of particular movements. In addition, they are potentially subject to manipulation for political purposes. This makes interpretation of such data highly problematic.

It is apparent that elements of this 'new' geography of migrations are not entirely new but that 'new' itineraries bear similarities to movements seen previously in the form of ancient, colonial or modern trade routes through Eastern Europe, Turkey or across the Sahara (Lydon, 2000; Marfaing and Wippel, 2004). For instance, contemporary migration including transit movements through Eastern Europe must be analysed in their relation to previous movements within the Soviet system of 'befriended states'. Some links faded with colonialism, or later as nation-states and borders became established, others however have continued to exist. Contemporary patterns of movement are of course not replicas of earlier migration systems and if attention is paid to processes, rather than patterns, of migration, a stronger case can be made for what characterises their break with the past.

In Central and Eastern Europe, migration was obviously limited by the 'iron curtain' and confined to movements within the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc. But after 1989, labour migrants from Ukraine, refugees from Chechnya and Uzbekistan and others began breaking through these limits and moved west. There is now anecdotal evidence that Ukrainian workers have moved to replace Poles going to the UK. Thus, the effect of the continuation, expansion and subsequent overlapping of migration systems can be observed. Current migration patterns must be analysed within the context of migration systems that sometimes emerged in the Soviet era and that continue to link together (a) the former Soviet Union republics with each other (Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine etc), (b) with countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East which used to be aligned with the Soviet bloc (Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola and others) and (c) since the fall of the Iron Curtain also with former communist countries that are now in the EU (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and so on).

In addition to changing geographies of migration, a second significant difference over the last decade is provoked by technological developments that facilitate or inhibit this movement.

Technological change and improvement of transport and communication infrastructure is central to the diversification and intensification of migration to Europe from increasingly distant origin countries. Migrants have developed dense social networks, which they must rely on for almost everything, given the hostility of the physical and political environments in which they are moving. Contact is maintained between migrants and with family members along the way, back in the country of origin or in other destination countries by mobile phone and web based email and phone. Financial support can be received due to the widespread availability of money transfer companies. Across the Sahara, Sahel and Central Asia these facilities were not even available a decade ago and now they are everywhere cheaper and easier to access.

These technological advances represent significant structural changes in the capacity to move cheaply (though not always safely), enabling migration systems that had previously been largely confined south of the Sahara to reach to the coasts of the Mediterranean, from where they have increasingly joined the northbound movement of low skilled north-African labour migrants to West Europe that had already started in the 1960s and 1970s (de Haas, 2008b). Of course, this does not necessarily mean that all or most migrants wish to get to Europe, as North African countries are becoming a destination in their own right. However, what is called 'transit migration' may represent the expansion of previously more constrained and spatially distinct regional migration systems so that they overlap to a much greater extent than was previously the case.

A third significant development over the past decade is a diversification in the various ways in which immigrants, temporary, irregular and transit migration is classified by states and international organisations. Some of this is with the aim of distinguishing refugees, to whom states have significant legally defined obligations, from other migrants. Individuals who are seeking protection are frequently classified or re-branded as ('illegal') transit migrants, yet the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees forbids contracting states imposing penalties on refugees who are 'unlawfully resident' (UNHCR 1951: Article 31). The notion of 'secondary movement' was introduced in the EU in the 1990s to refer to migration

of a refugee who had already received or could have claimed protection elsewhere, which would therefore not be covered under the exception of Article 31 and could potentially be penalised. Under EU sponsorship The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) broadened discussion of 'irregular secondary movement' to a global scale in its Convention Plus initiative in 2003. Since then a number of other terms have been used to discuss the confusion between refugees and 'economic' migrants, such as the 'migration asylum nexus' or UNHCR's current preferred term, 'mixed flows'. All three of these terms are commonly applied to transit migration. All this points to a significant protection gap of refugees *en route* to a safe country. A further confusion relates to the rebranding of economic migrants from distant countries as 'transit migrants', as observed in Ukraine. This seems to indicate that long-term immigration, settlement and integration is neither appreciated nor intended and implies that the state's policy is to encourage them to leave again and highlights related issues with the rights of (temporary) labour migrants.

Our fourth and final point is that these changes also affect other parts of the world. In the 1990s, Europe was unusually affected by the 'new migration' as it was close to the centre of the geopolitical change that provoked it. Although they are usually not labelled as such, movements that have much in common with European 'transit' migration are common elsewhere in the world. In terms of maritime migrations, large-scale movements from Vietnam in the late 1970s established a pattern that has been followed by migrants from Cuba or Haiti to the US in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently from Iraq and Afghanistan through Indonesia to Australia. In contrast to the rather derogatory term 'boat people' that is still applied to certain maritime migrants, Ronald Reagan memorably warned against the arrival of 'feet people' in the US from countries in Central America (Cannon, 1983). More than 20 years later, overland migration from Central America through Mexico is as common as comparable movements into Central Asia, Turkey or the Maghreb. Also countries as diverse as South Africa or Korea have also developed associated migration systems.

It is significant that for all the commonalities in these diverse array of migrations the label 'transit' has almost only been applied to particular

types of migration in the European neighbourhood. There is inevitably a degree of Eurocentrism in the use of this terminology that is inherent in the assumption that Europe is the destination of any migrant potentially within reach (Düvell 2006). Yet there are also more valid reasons for a focus only on the European example, which we have followed in the selection of papers for this special issue. Although regions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (Düvell and Molodikova, 2009) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are developing a degree of regional integration, no other region of the world is as politically unified on the supra-national level as the EU in its common approach to the free movement of citizens within the region and non-citizens at and beyond its external borders.

The continual evolution of supra-national policy making in Europe forms a vital background to the discussion of transit migration. Although the foundations for this system were laid in the 1990s, this is a relatively recent development. The European Commission has only had the power to draft legislation since the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999; it has only had any real power since qualified majority voting was applied to many migration related issues 5 years later in 2004 and the involvement of the European Parliament in decision making in migration and asylum began only in 2008. The first year of operation of the increasingly significant common border control organisation, Frontex, was in 2006 and it was only in 2009 that the Commission proposed a genuinely harmonised border control, an integrated system referred to as EUROSUR, and only then in the Mediterranean. These recent developments in the harmonisation of policy across the EU have direct impact on the surround region with which papers in this special issue are concerned.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO TRANSIT MIGRATION

The papers in this special issue were initially presented at a conference at Koç University, Istanbul in April 2008. The conference was supported by the EU funded Network of Excellence on International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe. The papers share two important perspectives. First, the idea that

there is something inherently problematic about the term 'transit migration' and there is therefore a need to develop a sustained critical approach to its continued use. Second, that despite these problems, the range of migratory phenomena called 'transit migration' represent an important dimension of migration in and to Europe that have much to teach us about the development and impact of EU policy on neighbouring countries and about the organisation and evolution of migration systems. A systematic study of 'transit migration' in the greater European geo-political context can also generate important lessons about the way in which migrants respond to the political-economic environment and the ways in which this is presented and discussed in the overlapping fields of policy, media and academia.

First, the problem of 'transit migration': as well as a type of migration it is commonly used to describe certain migrants, forms of migration and even the countries they are deemed to traverse. The term can be seen as an attempt to group a heterogeneous array of migration processes, migrants, potential migrants and countries around a limited series of largely undefined commonalities involving illegality, high risk, lack of control and above all an assumed desire to reach European territory. All this is on the basis that the migrants involved have 'transited' or may 'transit' somewhere, passing through to a further destination that is assumed to be the EU. This can only be sustained by considerable political effort and its continued popularity as a category can be explained by its significance in the EU's relations with its neighbours as a convenient euphemism for subjects that are potentially politically delicate (see the papers by Düvell and Hess).

Yet the second point that brings these papers together is that there is something worthy of analysis (see the papers by Collyer and de Haas, İçduygu and Yukseker and Al-Sharmani). The nature of transit migration opens up productive discussion of broader issues such as the inherent problems involved in conventional policy categories of 'types' of migration, the growing significance of migration policy in shaping migration outcomes and migrant categories but also the increasingly influential way in which policy categories affect the ways in which migration is discussed, studied and understood.

Themes Addressed by the Articles

The overview article by Franck Düvell analyses the political genesis and meaning of the concept of transit migration and critically discusses the state-of-the-art of research and our understanding of transit migration. Transit migration is commonly understood as movements of people from a supposed country of origin through various countries *en route* until they arrive in a supposedly final destination country. However, Düvell argues that such understanding is largely driven by preoccupations among governments and intergovernmental organisations about the (irregular) crossing of borders, which has led to a politicisation of the concept. Particularly, certain countries on the 'fringes' of Europe have been labelled as 'transit countries' and are put under considerable political pressure to contain these 'unwanted' migration flows. Düvell argues that the transit migration concept is scientifically blurred and confused with other categories such as irregular and circular migration. He therefore proposes a scientifically more sound and rigid definition of the concept.

On the basis of research conducted in Turkey, Greece and the Balkan region, Sabine Hess' article discusses conceptual and methodological problem facing scholars studying transit migration. While arguing against attempts to artificially 'fix' the phenomenon, Hess introduces the concept of 'precarious transit zone' in order to grasp the complexity, unsteadiness, diversity and multi-directionality of migratory 'transitbiographies'. Hess argues that the concept of 'transit zone' allows a consideration of a wide diversity of 'transit' migrants ranging from visa-overstayers, rejected asylum seekers to migrants 'stuck in mobility'. She argues in favour of combining ethnographic research with critical analyses of discourses and the macro-level (political) contexts in which transit migration is constructed and defined. Such an 'ethnographic regime approach' also enables an analysis of the role of academic research itself in re-constructing a category such as 'transit migration'. This challenges methodological positivism whereby policy creates the different categories of the 'migrant other' – and migration research reifies this production through the act of naming.

In their article on transit migration in Turkey, Ahmet Içduygu and Deniz Yükseser show how

debates about transit migration do not just reflect a new reality, but are also a part of a constructed reality created by discursive practices. This paper investigates the political and discursive construction of transit migration by focusing on the case of Turkey as a zone of transit en route to the European Union. Their close examination of changes in Turkey's and the EU's migration highlight both the discursive construction of transit migration and how these discourses have affected the migratory realities on the ground. The article shows how the 'securitisation' of migration in Europe and Turkey's EU membership bid have had the ambiguous effect of increasing pressure on Turkey to securitise migration within its borders and, at the same time, to conform fully to the norms of the international refugee regime.

Sylvie Bredeloup, writing on transit in the Saharan region, argues that transit migration is not a new phenomenon, and that in fact the real novelty is that it is perceived or presented as new by experts. She is interested in historical perspectives of transit from the Second World War onwards and reports on a number of research projects from both sides of the Mediterranean, as well as south of the Sahara. By re-emphasising the transitory nature of contemporary migration the term reintroduces an aspect of uncertainty in migration patterns, associating social marginalisation with precarious impermanence and illegality with criminality and transit, in order to provide an argument to eliminate it. Bredeloup shows that such perceptions are at odds with empirical evidence showing that only a minority of nationals of sub-Saharan African countries continue to Europe after having crossed the Sahara. The Sahara is not only a space that is crossed, it is also a place that is worked on, urbanised by the passage and residence of generations of migrants.

Drawing on fieldwork in Egypt, Mulki Al-Sharmani show how many refugees have been inadequately termed as 'transit' in academic and policy discourses based on their temporary and precarious status and their frequent desire for resettlement in Western countries. Al-Sharmani argues that such classification fails to capture the complex context(s), determining factors and the mixed and *changing* migratory experiences and motivations of refugees. She shows how many Somali refugees, for instance, did not, at the start

of their migration, have the intention to come to Egypt, and neither did they plan to resettle in the West. The paper concludes that instead of fixing these refugees within a particular category, it would be more insightful to examine refugee movements as part of transnational family-based collective efforts to seek the protection needs of refugees and their relatives in the midst of exclusionary refugee policies in several host countries in the region, as well as on-going armed conflict and unsafe living conditions in refugees' origin countries.

In their concluding article, Michael Collyer and Hein de Haas frame the specific debate on transit migration within the broader literature on migration categories. They re-examine common ways of categorising migrants and evaluate existing research and activism around subjects of immigration based on empirical examples from the Maghreb. They argue that although at first glance transit migration provides a solution to the binary, highly reductionist categorisations of migration that have tended to characterise the field, dominant understandings of the term depend on relatively fixed positions, allowing little room for the essential mobility the term itself captures. Based on this critique, the authors examine ways to develop more dynamic categorisations of transit migration, which can serve as a basis for developing our understanding of the phenomenon without fixing it. Their article concludes by setting out ways of advancing the research agenda on transit migration by focusing on exactly what is new about the processes, and in particular the fragmented nature of these forms of migration.

CONCLUSION

All contributors to this volume have broad empirical experience conducting research with migrants in areas beyond the external border of the European Union. We have made no clear distinction between academic research and policy evaluation as, in common with many migration researchers, most contributors have been involved in both. The contributors identify problems with the way 'policy-friendly' ideas are framed and legitimated in academia and in academic studies, though many of us are implicated in these processes ourselves, using the access granted by policy work to inform more critical

academic discussions. These problems appear to be inevitable to the ways in which the policy/ academia interface is structured, establishing a degree of co-dependency. Most papers do not report *directly* on contributors' empirical work but reflect in critical ways about the significance of the transit migration discourse and its likely impact on ways in which migration may be studied.

Contributors share an interest in interdisciplinary approaches. They originate in closely related branches of the disciplines of anthropology, geography, politics and sociology, which leads to a shared perspective that there is a degree of social constructivism at work in understandings of transit migration, which at the very least involves a series of assumptions about the behaviour of a diverse range of individuals. Studies on transit migration rarely rely on quantitative research as statistics are poor, non-existent or contested. The main source of large scale data comes from apprehensions statistics collected by governments and agencies like Frontex, which are however open to a number of interpretations and offer a clearer impression of the geographies of migration control operations than of the changing patterns of migration that these operations are designed to counter. All papers are therefore cautious, even suspicious, about any claims made for the accuracy of existing data.

Yet beyond this, the papers differ in their epistemological approach and the responses to this lack of verifiable empirical information vary accordingly. Several of the papers are interested primarily in the ways in which such statistics as do exist are gathered and used and how to make the most of the information they contain. Other papers approach the terminology of transit migration itself as a source of analysis, focusing more on the development, use and impact of the concept rather than any potentially objective facts behind it. Some papers suggest that due to the dynamic nature and unpredictable outcome of a migration project the use of the term 'transit migration' is inappropriate and misleading. Other authors find the term useful as a category to improve understanding of this type of new migration.

The similarities and differences between these papers reflect an exciting scholarly controversy of an area of research that is very much in flux. As the title of this special issue suggests, the

thrust of argument is that we should be critical of the varied political intentions behind the label of transit migration, but as many of the papers suggest the popularity of the term in both political and academic circles points to a number of areas which warrant further scrutiny. This special issue highlights the complexity of these processes but also suggests a number of directions for fruitful further research.

NOTE

(1) Observation by Düvell.

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