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MAPPING TRANSNATIONALISM: CONFERENCE REPORT

Salient issues on international migration: Buoni e cattivi segnali. Reporting from the 2014 International Metropolis Conference

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Introduction

Eighteen years ago, in 1996, a series of interdisciplinary migration dialogs were launched in Italy, bringing together policy makers, public representatives, members of the international civil society, as well as community researchers and academics. The birthplace of these discussions was the city of Milan. Since then, yearly transnational conferences have been unfolding under the umbrella of the International Metropolis research cluster. In 2014, the conference was hosted once again in Milan, between 3 and 7 November 2014. William Lacy Swing, Director General (DG) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) welcomed the timing of the conference as appropriately fitting between the 2013 United Nations (UN) High-Level Dialog on International Migration and Development and the ongoing discussions around the UN Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The conference was sponsored by one of its original founding associates and current International Committee members – the Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on Multi-Ethnicities (ISMU). Titled “Migration: Energy for the Planet – Feeding Cultures,” the 2014 International Metropolis served as a preamble to the 2015 Expo Milano which is a global non-commercial exposition on the historical and cultural production of food and new technologies. The International Metropolis juxtaposed its thematic focus to that of the Expo, in order to better emphasize the intrinsic value of migration for world societies. With Milan being one of the most multi-ethnic cities in Italy, and the Lombardy province counting about half of its population as “foreigners” – an estimated 1.5 million out of the 3 million inhabitants (Metropolis Press Release, 2014) – the city was deemed the ideal fit for fostering fruitful debates on international migration.

Driven by policy-relevant research and best practices exchanges, the conference brought together over 700 participants set to discuss up-to-date developments vis-à-vis transnational migration. With 80 workshops and 8 plenaries, no reporting efforts could comprehensively and thoroughly capture the variety and complexity of the topics addressed. Within such context, this brief reporting piece focuses on three main themes that emerged from the conference: (1) the implications of current geopolitical shifts for international migration and migration management; (2) the development of a multi-level migration governance across international, national, as well as regional and local

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jurisdictions; and (3) the challenges related to integration and diversity efforts within host societies.

Migration and migration management in the wake of global crises

The opening plenary was dedicated to the unprecedented displacement crisis triggered by current events in Africa and the Middle East: with a global figure of 51.2 million people displaced by force in 2013, the world is facing the highest numbers of internally¹ displaced people (IDPs) (33.3 million) as well as refugees and asylum seekers (17.9 million) since the end of World War II (UNHCR, 2014). Discussions among panel members primarily fluctuated between states' human rights obligations on one hand and the quest for immigration control on the other hand. Volker Türk, Director of International Protection at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), highlighted that 86% of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries and that of the 1.2 million asylum seekers in 2013, only 330,000 applied for refugee status in developed countries. He emphasized that such contextual information should inform European policy debates and responses vis-à-vis asylum seekers' and irregular migrants' arrival at the region's southern shores. In the same vein, IOM DG Swing argued that Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries should also gain international recognition and support for having kept their borders open to regional refugees and asylum seekers.

The conference's setting in Italy proved topical for the debate surrounding Europe's policy responses to the global displacement crisis: as the primary European country of entry for refugees from Africa and the Middle East and the state that holds the European Union (EU) Council's Presidency for the second half of 2014, Italy has made migration a top policy priority on the EU agenda. As Philippe Fargues from the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute highlighted, the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean has grown exponentially: while over the past 15 years approximately 50,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean every year, in 2014 this number rose to nearly 140,000 (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2014). He further stressed that such crossings are becoming more and more dangerous, with a 2% chance of dying during the trip. Responding to the growing numbers of migrant deaths at sea, the Italian government established the "Mare Nostrum" operation (OMN) in October 2013. OMN has integrated migration control and rescue activities, with the purpose of ensuring the safety of migrant lives at sea, but also of combating human trafficking and smuggling activities (Ministero della Difesa, 2013). OMN has also sustained cooperation agreements with various professional organizations to provide emergency medical and legal services for new arrivals. While panel members disagreed on the long-term goals of the operation, especially regarding the problematic blending of rescue and border control efforts, recent data suggests that between October 2013 and October 2014, OMN rescued approximately 150,000 migrants at sea (IOM, 2014). Keeping such numbers in mind, IOM DG Swing criticized OMN's recent replacement by the FRONTEX-led Triton Operation² whose focus significantly shifts away from sea rescue efforts towards reinforcing European border controls.

The international community's responsibility for responding to the global migration crises was also addressed across a variety of workshops. Speakers emphasized the need to prevent migrants from using exploitative and dangerous smuggling networks and to react to the increased numbers of unaccompanied children arriving at Europe's borders. The expansion of resettlement programs and the establishment of refugee determination procedures in origin and transit countries were mentioned as potential policy solutions.

Sandra Sarti, Deputy Cabinet Chief for the Italian Ministry of the Interior, further stressed that improved cooperation with countries of origin and transit is key in guaranteeing migrants' safety. Although panel members agreed that comprehensive policy solutions should tackle the root causes of migration and displacement, Laura Corrado, from the Home Affairs Directorate General within the European Commission, concluded by referencing the challenges of migration policy-making in Europe: while she considered the signature of Mobility Partnerships³ with North African countries in recent years as a policy success, she also raised serious doubts about states' willingness to increase the EU migration budget and to undertake the much-needed revisions of the Dublin system, currently regulating the EU asylum policy.

Multi-layered and multi-level migration policies

While migration policies are traditionally considered the bastion of nation states, the conference showcased a multi-layered migration management, simultaneously developed and implemented at the national, supra-national (i.e. international, regional) and sub-national (i.e. federal, provincial, municipal) levels. While international and regional migration governance efforts are often seen as infringing on nation state's jurisdictions, several presenters argued that such initiatives also provide opportunities for an improved migration management system. Thus, despite wide criticism of EU migration policies, plenary and workshop speakers highlighted the unique EU achievements in the area of migration, particularly with regards to European citizens' freedom of movement and the legal guarantees for asylum seekers or family members in European law. Nevertheless, Yves Pascouau, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre, criticized the EU Council's recently adopted strategic guidelines on migration for lacking specific goals and being confined to the five-year logic of policy cycles (European Council, 2014). He thus called upon policy makers to elaborate a long-term and comprehensive vision of EU migration policies, which would take into account how other areas of EU policy, such as trade, agricultural, and foreign policy, play into migration.

Panels and workshops zooming out of the European context showed that migration cooperation worldwide is most often achieved through soft law, in particular via non-binding mechanisms of practice exchanges such as the Regional Consultative Processes on migration (RCPs), rather than through the supranational legal instruments of migration management. For instance, participants discussed regional trade agreements as providing a strong foundation for subsequent migration management, since they tend to establish a necessary trust level between national governments. The 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, as well as the 1991 creation of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela, were discussed as prototypes of such an approach. Latin American countries are particularly interesting in this regard: over the past decade, they have adopted a human-rights based approach in their migration policies and implemented reforms that opened up their borders to migrants and that facilitated access to social services (Acosta Arcarazo & Freier, *in press*). Such approaches confront the current securitization and border control discourse dominating European and North American policy circles, while providing an example for alternative policy solutions.

Outside the regional and supra-national policy-making sphere, several panels and workshops at the International Metropolis Conference addressed the (often underestimated) role of cities in migration management. As urban spaces, cities tend to draw

most migrants within a host country, attracting highly skilled professionals, young international students, temporary migrants, asylum seekers, or undocumented individuals. They are the “melting pots” where diversity is experienced, both as an opportunity but also as a challenge. Faced with complex realities of migration overlapping the social fabric of these urban environments, cities oftentimes elaborate their own policies towards migrants. Yet these can easily clash against the goals and priorities set by the nation states these very same cities are contained within. For instance, the “sanctuary city” approach initiated in the United States provides several examples of metropolises that openly welcomed migrants and granted them access to municipal social and health services, regardless of their legal immigration status. Such efforts are noteworthy given the US national policy context of increased securitization and migration restrictions (Ridgley, 2008). “Sanctuary” policies have also been replicated in Canada, with the Toronto City Council passing a motion in February 2013 that guarantees access to city services for undocumented migrants (Keung, 2013). While Toronto is the first Canadian city to adopt such a human-rights grounded municipal initiative, there are about 38 cities in the United States that have already implemented such policies, including Chicago, New York, and San Francisco (Keung, 2013). In Europe, these developments remain embryonic. Nevertheless, some growing evidence of European cities’ emancipation in terms of migration management has been documented (Spencer, 2013).

Making integration and diversity work

A third vector of discussions within the 2014 Metropolis Conference was migrant integration and diversity. Two main sub-themes emerged out of the panels and workshops: on one hand, the traditional approach conceiving integration as a linear process, starting with a migrant entering the host country and ending with her or his acquisition of citizenship, was reasoned as outdated. Within a context of changing migration patterns, marked by complex transnational mobility, circularity, and diverse intersecting identities, discussants overall agreed that the notion of integration requires re-conceptualization. Panelists also discussed a variety of policy measures that acknowledge the plurality of migration and integration processes, such as pre-integration measures, dual citizenship regimes, and anti-discrimination practices. However, serious doubts were raised about the political underpinnings of some of these procedures. For instance, pre-departure integration measures and language tests were denounced by several discussants as impediments to actual integration and mere tools to fine-tune the selection of migrants.

On the other hand, discussions around the social and economic opportunities of diversity branded migrants as highly valued commodities within our competitive and pluralistic societies (Kuboyama, 2008). Panelists highlighted the need to attract talent and manage diversity by involving multiple actors within the state apparatus, but also within civil society and the private sector: NGOs, industry, ethnic entrepreneurs, and media all have crucial roles to play in fostering an atmosphere conducive to plural and open societies. Yet, such a discourse is heavily rooted in understandings of diversity seen as advantageous only when they competitively benefit socio-economic development. The reality of migration patterns however is more complex. For instance, family and humanitarian migration streams, whose economic added value is not apparent at first sight, cannot be comprehensively addressed through a market-oriented integration approach.

With IOM DG Swing referring to increased migration not only as an “inevitable” process (in terms of global demographic and geo-political changes) but also as a “necessary and desirable” socio-economic development, the interaction between migrants and their

host societies becomes ever more relevant. Subsequently, the integration-diversity dyad requires further reflection: today, migrant integration prospects are often tied to entry selection criteria and are not universally accessible to all. In viewing irregular migrants as “unworthy” subjects, integration is often societally restricted to those deemed “worthy” of regular entry in the first place. This conceptualization of integration however is short-sighted and calls for revisions. Diversity, in turn, should be thoroughly analyzed in terms of intersecting identity and relational axes of belonging, and not just merely annexed as a tool for socio-economic development. Throughout the conference, fundamental questions remained thus unanswered: who are those we aim to integrate? What do we want them to integrate into? And ultimately: who are we and who do we strive to be?

Conclusion(s)

After four days of intense discussions, the 2014 International Metropolis led to mixed conclusions: conceptually, the conference managed to extend the often myopic view of migration management as the state’s bastion and the sole product of national policy by shedding light on the multiple actors involved in migration and integration processes: migrants themselves, NGOs, cities and regional communities, or businesses and firms, to name just a few. The advantages of such a multi-actor view on migration management are the opportunities for shared responsibility and cooperation that come with it. However, international migration cannot be conceptualized as a static process which is independently managed by a multitude of key stakeholders. Thus, such a multi-layered approach would need to accommodate an even broader array of oftentimes diverging priorities and interests.

The focus of the 2014 Metropolis was largely on Europe, as discussions around transnational practices and global policy-relevant migration research were rare. Apart from the context of bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements, origin countries were largely absent from discussions, time and again regarded as passive frames from which migration originates. A more inclusive view of international migration, comprising the crucial role played by institutional actors within origin countries in terms of triggering, furthering, hindering, or prohibiting certain types of migration, would importantly shape our understanding of migrants arriving at western shores. Otherwise, the overt focus on receiving countries within the western world disregards two major determinants of international migration: the unequal global economic relations between nation states and the internal state formation processes within the Global South.

Guided by a quest for solution-focused policy responses, the 2014 International Metropolis Conference appeared to brand migration as a “problem to be solved.” Yet, discussing migration only in terms of management – be it at the national, regional, or international level – disregards migrants’ agency and aspirations. Also, by grounding migration management within an epistemological framework of positivism and objectivism, where migrants are numerically quantified and regarded as “objects” to be managed, migration is framed within a cost-benefit logic and thus primarily conceived as a tool for economic growth and development. This poses the question of why migration is still so often singularly annexed to economic policy-making rather than being taken as a transnational process on its own. It would thus be interesting to envision how the Metropolis knowledge platform would look if it was to be guided by notions of understanding and belonging rather than economic priorities, or if it was to conceive migration as an integral part of social transformations (Castles, 2010). With the 2015 International Metropolis Conference taking place in Mexico City, this might be a timely

opportunity to learn from recent policy developments and discussions in Latin America, where countries have started to adopt a human rights approach to migration.

Notes

1. IDP is an official term used for people who are being displaced within their own countries (for instance if one lived in Damascus but had to flee to Aleppo in the north of Syria).
2. Triton is a Frontex-coordinated border control operation by 21 EU member states in the central Mediterranean, which started its activities on 1 November 2014 (European Commission, 2014). Although it does not aim to officially replace OMN, the end of OMN coupled with Triton's focus on monitoring borders implies that search and rescue activities at the Italian coast will be de facto discontinued.
3. The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) has been the overarching framework of the EU external migration and asylum policy since 2005. Within the GAMM, the Mobility Partnerships provide a structure of cooperation with countries in the eastern and southern neighbourhood of the EU in relation to visa facilitation, border control, and readmission of migrants (European Commission, 2007). The EU signed recent Mobility Partnerships with Morocco (2013) and Tunisia (2014), agreements that have been considered successful by EU policy makers.

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