

Summary paper written for the EU Network on International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE) and COMPAS

Transit, Migration and Politics Trends and Constructions on the Fringes of Europe

Transit migration is a synthetic concept that merges transit and migration. The concept is as dynamic as it is scientifically blurred and ideologically and politically loaded. It is frequently confused with irregular and circular migration, with shuttle migration and with refugees. The term refers to certain forms of supposedly temporary immigration and to migrants who keep moving from country to country, either intentionally or in response to changing conditions, rising pressures and new incentives. And more generally, it refers to real and imagined journeys and odysseys, which may be long in distance and time, they may continually change direction and at times they may be hazardous.

On the one hand, transit migration is an umbrella term that embraces very different categories such as refugees and labour migrants and applies generally to mixed flows, and regular and irregular migration, and temporary immigration. The concept refers to types of migration that are not straight one-off moves but involve various stages, to forced interruption of journeys, forced on-migration, or even separate trajectories. Sometimes, it refers to ambitions or mere dreams of aliens staying in one of the countries outside the European Union hoping to move on to an EU country.

On the other hand the term transit migration has become a political code for unwanted and often irregular immigration to the European Union. Notably countries that are labelled transit countries are held responsible by the European Union for unwanted migration from poor distant countries. And as such transit migration resembles a war cry that is directed at the neighbouring countries of the EU Transit Zones that are expected to keep this migration off EU territory. This paper, which is based on the presentations of an international IMISCOE conference on '(Irregular) Transit migration in the European Space' (Istanbul, 18-19 April 2008), aims to untangle some of these issues.

Mixed flows, diverse realities

Migrants and refugees can originate from neighbouring or distant countries. In some cases they cannot obtain a visa and a certain proportion turns to irregular strategies and sometimes to informal agents. For those who come from distant countries overland journeys can be long and might involve crossing intervening countries. For instance, migrants and refugees may fly from their origin countries to European or Northern African countries bordering the European Union and then try to cross the border illegally to an EU country by boat, foot or hidden in containers or the back of a lorry. In other cases migrants simply may not have the financial resources to book a travel package including flight and visa; therefore they may turn to cheaper means of transportation – lorries, coaches and trains - and use land routes instead. Some migrants even have to work whilst under way in order to finance their next leg. Thus, visa regimes and aspects of class determine modes of migration.

Transit migrants often follow traditional and even ancient routes, as those across the Sahara, and often move within established migration systems, as within the Russian-speaking world. Transit migration can overlap with emigration from the transit country, as observed in Portugal and in Ukraine where non-EU migrants move jointly with Portuguese, respectively Polish labour migrants to Spain, or the UK. It also overlaps with circular migration as evidence from Portugal shows. Transit migrants often move within certain (ethnic) networks and research suggests that inter-connected transnational ethnic communities in various countries provide safe corridors within which people move through various countries. Where irregular agents ('smugglers') are involved these either assist migrants for short, difficult sections of the journey, such as across an individual border or they prepare the whole journey and determine the routes taken and length of stop-overs in the countries on route. Finally, migrants may become 'stranded' in non-EU countries because they run out of money, fail to overcome a certain border, or because they are abandoned by their smugglers. The various aspects of such journeys – exit from country of origin, entry to and subsequent stay in a transit country, exit from a transit country, and entry into an EU country – can be regular or irregular. Usually, some sections of the journey are regular whilst others are not.

A different case is represented by migrants and refugees who intend or would be prepared to remain in a certain country but find legal or socio-economic conditions unviable or access to refugee status impossible. As a consequence, they may try their luck in yet another country, as observed in Turkey and Ukraine. And sometimes, immigrants in non-EU countries face a deterioration of either the economic conditions or the political climate and are compelled to move to other countries as was the case during the collapse of Socialism in Balkan countries and more recently in response to deteriorating conditions in Egypt. In contrast, migrants who were hoping to pass by or only transit a country, such as Malta, are apprehended and their journeys are forcefully interrupted or terminated. Others get trapped in dead-end-roads, as for instance in Cyprus where onward journeys to Greece are basically blocked. Finally, certain EU regulations, notably the 'Dublin II' convention, result in refugees being returned from their present host country to their first EU country of arrival. It is likely that they will try again to reach a country of their choice. Under such conditions, refugees are effectively kept on the move.

Thus, four dimensions characterise this type of migration, time, intention, law and identity. On-migration can be either intended or forced (though the distinction between forced and voluntary migration is sociologically rather blurred); sojourns in other countries on route can also be planned or forced. Time spent in a country between the place of origin and the place of final destination can last from just a few days, or a few months to several years. This makes it difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between temporary and permanent migration. The above examples illustrate that transit migration is an umbrella concept that embraces transit, transit migration, temporary immigration or forced stay, on-migration or even continuous trajectories as well as a certain mental unrest. Thus, it reflects a state of uncertainty, impermanence and continuous mobility.

The geography of transit migration: zones and hubs

Transit migration can be identified with transit zones, notably in Saharan Africa, the Middle East and some Newly Independent Countries (NIC) in Eastern Europe. Four quadrants of transit migration can be identified; the Eastern quadrant (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan), the South East European quadrant (Turkey, Cyprus, the Balkan), the Central Mediterranean quadrant (Mali, Libya, Tunisia, Malta) and the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic quadrant (Morocco, Algeria, Mauretania). Once inside the European Union, migrants often keep on travelling. Evidence shows that almost all EU countries are also transited by migrants and refugees, e.g. from Greece to Italy, from Italy to Switzerland, from Hungary to France, from Austria to Portugal, from Spain to France or Germany, from France to the UK et cetera.

Six kinds of countries are involved in transit migration:

- the country of origin;
- the countries that are stage posts along the road (e.g. Russia, Yemen, Mauretania, Senegal, Mali);
- the stepping stone to the EU (e.g. Ukraine, Serbia, Turkey, Libya, Cape Verde, Morocco);
- the first EU country (e.g. Slovakia, Hungary, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Italy, Spain);
- EU countries that are passed en route (e.g. Austria, Germany, France); and

- the final country of destination in the EU, North America or elsewhere.

This, however, is not a rigid typology. Given the dynamic nature of migration (especially irregular migration) patterns, a particular country can simultaneously be an 'entry point' to the EU for some migrants and the 'final destination' for others. Furthermore, these characteristics often change over time, thus transit countries can become destination countries, such as Italy or Spain. Likewise, notions of 'final destination' might well change over migrants' journeys and experiences after settlement. A country initially considered as temporary may turn out to become a country of settlement, and the other way around. This exemplifies the fluidity of migrants' perceptions and intentions.

Further to this, in the geography of transit migration in and around the EU, certain hubs seem to emerge that act as significant crossroads, such as Moscow and St Petersburg in Russia; Kiev and Uzhgorod in Ukraine; Van, Cesme and Talabashe and Laleli in Istanbul/Turkey; Tamanghasset in Algeria; and Tangier and Rabat in Morocco. And also some islands seem to be in the forefront, notably the Canaries, Malta, and Lesbos in Greece. Other places identified with this type of migration are certain refugee reception centres, notably Debrecen in Hungary or Humenne in Slovakia, certain detention centres, such as Edirne in Turkey or Pavchino in Ukraine, street markets where migrants and refugees work for financing their living and sometimes on-migration (Shulavska in Kiev), or ramshackle settlements (Oujda in Morocco, Patras in Greece).

Because of ever changing political environments, intensifying controls and responsive migrants' strategies all this is subject to constant change: established ports of departure become policed and flows dry out; new opportunities arise and new paths are established; and with these paths new ports of departure and arrival emerge. For instance, migrants no longer depart from the Moroccan Mediterranean region but from the Atlantic coast, first from Morocco and now from Mauretania and Senegal; in Turkey migrants seem to increasingly avoid the Turkish-Greek land border and depart from the Southern Aegean Sea borders; and in Ukraine migrants increasingly prefer the Hungarian over the Slovak-Ukrainian border.

Meanwhile, evidence from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Turkey suggests that irregular transit migration peaked in 2000 and is now decreasing. And data from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that only 10-20 per cent of migrants in that region actually transit the Sahara to move north.

The politics and discourses of transit migration

The concept of transit migration was only invented during the 1990s and publicised by certain institutions, notably IOM, ICMPD, the Council of Europe and various UN agencies. Reference to transit migration often takes form of exaggerated even alarmist reports referring to 'waves', 'masses' or 'millions' of migrants heading North or West. Countries that are transited by migrants are successively integrated into a wider European policy framework of migration control. Concerns over transit migration informs migration policy making, notably the European Neighbourhood Policy, Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Barcelona and the Soderkoping Process. Notably, readmission agreements between the EU and its neighbouring countries are a direct outcome of such dynamics. This expansion of the EU's policy agenda is sometimes analysed as the internationalisation or externalisation of migration control. Meanwhile, in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is based on an agreement on mutual security, transit migration in particular of Arab, Iranian or Chechen people, is considered a security problem and since 2001 it has become associated with terrorism. Finally, non-EU countries sometimes label refugees as transit migrants to either justify their neglect, as in Ukraine, Turkey or in Egypt; occasionally, labour migrants who are no longer appreciated are redefined as transit migrants and subsequently removed, as observed in Libya. On the other hand, non-EU countries sometimes feel like 'buffer zones' or 'dumping grounds' for migrants unwelcomed in the EU. Sometimes, it is believed that the burden of migration control is shifted rather than shared amongst EU and non-EU countries. Subsequently, some countries question why they should support migrants whose intention is not to stay but to move to an EU country.

International organisations frequently note human and refugee rights violations along the EU's external borders, this often takes form of unlawful or violent return (refoulement), as reported from Greece, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Morocco. Human rights agencies also emphasise that there are also refugees amongst such flows. These should not be treated as 'illegal immigrants' but must get access to refugee status determination procedures. Other NGOs argue that migrants whilst under way are also vulnerable; they nevertheless rarely have access to public services or indeed a legal

status and seem to fall into a protection gap. Therefore, additional regulations are suggested that acknowledge human rights of mobile groups.

In the contemporary political geography of migration management, defining a given country as 'transit country' is an act laden with political consequences. A country which is perceived or presents itself as a 'transit country' enters a migration control partnership with the EU (and its member states). Such labelling can facilitate access to financial and technical aid in the field of migration controls. Thus, the emphasis on 'transit migration' generates a new strategic environment, which modifies the set of incentives and costs, opportunities and conditionalities shaping the political relations between the EU, its member states and neighbouring countries.

Stressing the nature of 'transit countries' entails a number of problematic consequences. There are at least three categories of potentially preoccupying effects:

- a) It may alter established policy priorities of an EU neighbouring country in the field of migration management, downplay and neglect the importance of economic immigration (as in case of Libya) or emigration (as seems to be the case in Morocco) and have a negative impact on overall domestic migration policies.
- b) An excessive and uncritical emphasis on transit flows may negatively affect the political and economic relations with more distant (and usually poorer) countries. For example, there is growing pressure on ECOWAS member states to further limit freedom of circulation within this alliance and to prevent emigration and flows supposedly directed towards the EU.
- c) Finally, the unbalanced positioning of EU neighbours and other EU partners as 'transit countries' may have a negative impact on internal political balances and dynamics in non-EU countries. This is because EU funding for migration control is often allocated to security agencies (internal affairs or military ministries) which can negatively affect the degree of internal political stability and pluralism of the recipient states.

Conclusion

The concept of transit migration is rather problematic. On the one hand it is a political concept which was introduced with a purpose and as such it has developed considerable political power. Moreover it reflects a certain level of discomfort with people and populations that are mobile and who are criss-crossing Europe and its neighbourhood in search of a viable new home. It also reflects unease with journeys and trajectories that are considered unusual. Thus, normative beliefs about how migration should be – direct, limited and managed – and how people should travel – regular, with a visa and by pre-booked packages – seem to inform the discourse.

On the other hand, it is a sociological concept that aims to cover a specific though complex set of types of migration. The problem lies in the tension between the two applications and its very different purposes. There is a clear danger that the popularity of the concept of transit migration and the analytical stretching this involves will undermine its heuristic value. What remains clear though is that there are migrants who travel through various countries, intended or unintended, and stay there for some length of time before they reach a final destination or return to their country of origin. This calls for more in-depth research of migrants' journeys and fluid migration trajectories.

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Source

The conference on which this paper is based brought together 26 experts from the Russian, French and English speaking scientific community and PhD students from ten countries (US, UK, NL, Germany, Sweden, France, Italy, Turkey, Libya, and Estonia). Paper givers presented the cases of Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Hungary, Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, Malta, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Morocco, Spain and Portugal. Issues discussed were concepts and definitions, constructions and discourses, EU migration and asylum politics, migrants' strategies and smuggling, methods and research ethics. Various perspectives were taken, notably from sending countries (Moldova, Senegal), stage posts (Mali, Malta), transit countries (Ukraine, Turkey, Morocco), and receiving countries (Spain, Portugal). For papers see http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/events/past_conferences_events.shtml.