Migrants unbound? Transnationalism, immigrant integration and return processes·

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Abstract

What is the relation between transnational migration, immigrant integration and return migration processes? Moving from a brief theoretical discussion of these social phenomena, the aim of this article is to discuss their relevance as well as interlinkages in the current multimodal and heterogeneous migration. Reference goes to the European context spanning, for instance, from labour migration to asylum seeking, from low to highly skilled migrants, and from migrant elders to the second migrant generations. A methodological approach to capture the extent and policy relevance of these processes has been suggested at the end.

Introduction

Transnational and return patterns of migration in Europe and their impact on integration practices pose several challenges for migration scholars and stakeholders. The following three research questions are worth addressing: (1) Are national migration policies able to adequately respond to old and new migration flows (from permanent to circular and return), the resulting migrants' needs and changes in sense of belonging? (2) What are the lessons to be learnt for those integration policy approaches traditionally based on the immigration/emigration dichotomy and the underlying idea of fixed identity? (3) How can the durability of transnational ties with the passage of time be dealt with and what are the consequences for immigrant integration practices?

The link between migrant transnationalism, immigrant integration and return migration lies at the core of this writing. The paper addresses the impact on immigrant integration policies and practices considering the contemporary changing nature of migration in Europe originating from the globalization processes, war and conflicts, the revolution in communication and transportation, and the reality of second-generation migrants on the one hand and migrants' ageing on the other hand. It advances different integration needs with emphasis on migrant integration and return practices of old and new migrant groups in different European locations.

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1.   Migrant transnationalism, integration and return: theoretical and policy challenges

The contemporary features of international migration and mobility have resulted into an increasingly blurred distinction between countries of origin, transit and destination of migratory flows. Almost every country and different regions are nowadays covering all three roles – e.g. North Africa is being transformed from region of origin to region of transit and destination and the same goes for Eastern Europe. Although with diverse characteristics, Morocco and Ukraine are two paramount case studies of similar changing migration dynamics.

Temporary migration has thus taken a much more important role than migration in the last two centuries, which was mostly permanent. As a result of similar ongoing population dynamics, we can therefore observe the transition from the traditional model of migration with initial displacement followed by final return home to several migrations over a lifetime, often to different countries, with periodic returns home (Koser, 2007).

The present article addresses three challenges that the current processes of migration have brought to the forefront. They pertain to the following combination of migration processes, which seem apparently in contradiction with each other:

- unidirectional migration and multimodal migration
- migrant transnationalism and immigrant integration
- return migration, migrant transnationalism and social networks.

The causal factors behind these migration configurations include the revolution of transport and communications but also the incentives provided by the developed countries to circular migration in order to avoid costlier sensitive integration policies but, at the same time, to spark development processes in developing countries through diaspora practices. The outcomes bring to the fore the transnational realities of many migrants living dual lives "being here and there" at the same time. These transnational migrants contribute to generate hybrid identities and develop multiple citizenship, where dual or multiple nationalities are permitted. Governance practices should, as a consequence, acknowledge different approach to "integration" in local and national policies. These approaches should therefore take into account different categories of migrants and refugees with very diverse needs. Is this the current case in many immigrant locations across Europe?

1.1. Transnational migration

In addressing the above research questions, let's first briefly outline the transnational concept. Transnationalism is neither new nor limited to migration-related phenomena, but refers to a wider range of actions, processes and institutions that cross the boundaries of states or national communities. In the contemporary debate,

the notion of transnationalism has been generally used to refer to migrants' ongoing ties with source countries.

Portes et al. (1999: 217) argue: "while back-and-forth movements by immigrants have always existed, they have not acquired until recently the critical mass and complexity necessary to speak of an emergent social field. This field is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders." By relying on the empirical work of Bryan Roberts on the Mexico - US migration system and its transformations from temporary migration, Portes et al. (1999) looked at the causes of transnational migration by arguing that a transnational migration pattern results when both the return pull of sending communities and retaining power of receiving economies are high.

The initial perspective from Portes et al. emphasized the economic dimension of transnational migration. The following discussion is, however, much broader and encompasses non-economic factors as well. Transnational practices "from below" as forms of adaptation to the influences of global capital are also reformulated by considering "middle forms of transnationalism as in the case of highly educated or middle-class migrants." Hybridity in global cities is thus another appealing perspective for the study of transnationalism (Ang, 2000).

Main theories on transnational migration focus on the so-called "transnational turn in empirical migration research", as well as the current discussion on the research methods to estimate "floating populations" (Amelina, Faist and Nergiz, 2013). Transnationalism has been also early criticized for its supposedly ambivalent linkage with incorporation processes (Kivisto, 2001). Although not all migrants are transnational migrants, and not all those who take part in transnational practices like communication, traveling, exchange of goods or remittances do so all the time, the contemporary ease of communication and transportation has clearly changed the extent and magnitude of transnational formations.

1.2 Transnational migration and immigrant integration

Transnational lifestyle patterns are also the result of top-down policymaking approaches that can be observed in the East-West and South-North geographical contexts in Europe. Restrictive or more open admission and migration control policies have always significant side effects re-directing flows on the ground and sparking different transnational configurations (Ruspini, 2011; Richter et al, 2017). As a consequence, current patterns of circular, transit and return migration in the European continent provide a set of new challenges for integration policies. Under conditions of globalisation, the growing transnationalism (and the role of Diasporas) urges a redefinition of the traditional notions of integration based on incorporation and assimilation. Notions of identity are evolving as individuals increasingly 'belong' to more than one country and society. Transnational communities are thus becoming an important way to organize activities, relationships, and identity for a growing number of people with affiliations in different European countries. The changed sense of affiliation affects also different strands of immigrant integration

policies like access to social and health services or to civic rights and duties which pertain to residency in the receiving country.

Do these national policies follow suit the new migration patterns and changes in the sense of belonging? In the integration realm, migration policies are still most often based on the traditional immigration/emigration dichotomy and the underlying idea of fixed identity. A limited number of administratively determined immigrant categories distinguishes mobile populations of increasingly diverse origin. Therefore, integration concerns in mobile population have been largely addressed in terms of traditional migrant classification (e.g. refugee, immigrant, temporary worker, etc.) Although these categories reflect historical migration flows and selected current situations, they seem not fully representative of contemporary migrant diversity or disparity, nor do they reflect the present reality of differences relevant to the changing migration landscape of many receiving, transit and return countries.

Transnational patterns of migration and their impact on integration practices pose additional challenges (e.g. Ruspini, 2014). For instance, on the one hand, we do have the first generation of migrants who came as 'guest workers' to Western European countries or were asked to come on the assumptions that overall they would return to their country of origin. This sometimes resulted into no wish, no need (and often no policies) to get integrated. Since they are currently ageing, they do require proper access to/and different kind of integration services (Ruspini, 2010). On the other hand, the ease of transport and communication makes the transnational life of many second-generation migrants in Europe much easier and their daily needs and sense of belonging are changing.

Data on the European situation suggest that transnationalism does not inevitably hinder integration (Vermeulen, 2006). Therefore, some European historians have questioned the transnationalism-integration equation (Lucassen, Feldman and Oltmer, 2006). In this regard, a pragmatic approach seems to prevail in migration studies that disputes the binary opposites between transnationalism and integration. This approach advances that connections with the homeland and the receiving society occur simultaneously: migrants may thus be both integrated and transnational (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen, 2013; Mügge, 2016). Does this hypothesis hold true in empirical terms? How can the matter of the durability of transnational ties with the passage of time be dealt with? As well as "the ever-present lure of cultural adaptation?" (Faist, 2000: 238). Finally, how do integration and transnationalism influence each other? (Bivand Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). The above research questions are thus relevant for different immigrant integration realms, including policies and practices as per following description.

The present circular, often repetitive flows of migration, such as labour migrants, migrants visiting friends and relatives or returning to their place of origin can generate specific challenges pertaining to social and health needs that exceed the capacities of traditional integration programmes developed for unidirectional migration. The consistent outflows of asylum seekers moving from neighbouring countries to the European migration space adds further challenges to the above picture in view of the specific needs of these vulnerable persons which include a significant number of women and children. Intercultural competences and the ability

to deal with diversity are then increasingly important aspects in migrant-receiving, transit and return locations.

1.3 Return migration, migrant transnationalism and social networks

The above discussion brings us to the third theoretical component that this paper aims to briefly introduce. Return in combination with transnational migration opens, in fact, several other research questions. First and foremost, how do migrant transnationalism and return migration relate to each other? Secondly, what is the unique contribution of social networks and transnationalism to comprehend return migration? At last, what migration theory can learn from empirical research? Although it is out of the scope of this writing to link migration theory with relevant examples from empirical research, it is however important to touch base with the latter dimension.

Return migration is a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon, which still constitutes a relatively new topic on the European research agenda. Except for historical considerations on return migration from the "New World" in the first decade of the last century (Cerase, 1974), and a short-term interest in the remigration of Southern European guest workers in the 1960s and 1970s, the theme remained an underrated research field of European migration for quite a long time (Dustmann et al., 1996).

Gmelch (1980: 135) notes different reasons for this longstanding neglect of return migration. It has been neglected since migration has long been seen as a one-way movement in the nineteenth century; migration was conceptualised as permanent and seen in a rural-urban framework moving only in one direction towards the urban centres. In addition, return is also the most difficult aspect of the migration cycle to quantify because of lack of comparable data on outgoing persons (Gmelch, 1980: 136; King, 1978).

In contrast to previous definitions focusing mainly on the time spent abroad before the return to a migrant's country of origin, more recently a personal dimension in the process of return migration has been identified by the MIREM project (2005-8). In this context, a returnee is "any person returning to his/her country of origin, in the course of the last ten years, after having been an international migrant (whether short-term or long-term) in another country. Return may be permanent or temporary. It may be independently decided by the migrant or forced by unexpected circumstances" (MIREM, 2005-8).

In this context, the introduction of a transnational approach allows us to go beyond an essentialistic and/or purely ethnic perspective on return migration. The transnational perspective does view return not at the end of migration cycle but with return the migration process continues. The binary structuralist vision of cross border movements is thus questioned, taking into account the circularity of migration movements, which facilitates migrants' mobility (Chapman and Prothero, 1983-84).

The social network theory provides then an important addendum to the contribution of transnationalism in understanding return migration. First of all, social networks can be defined as ties or connections between individuals that vary in strength, type and duration (Granovetter, 1973). In view of Bourdieu (1986) social

networks in the guise of social capital represent potential resources (such as help in finding a job, financial or moral help) which need to be activated. Belonging to a group gives, in fact, access to a network, but the access to the resources depends therefore on the individual and his or her position in the network.

Networks are then important resources for migration since they provide channels to enter a desired country or help in settling in a specific society. Three types of social networks usually shape the migration processes: labour, personal (family) and the so-called "illegal" migrant networks. All they provide benefits and costs for migrants (Boyd and Nowak, 2012). Additionally, although networks are important for employment and social opportunities particularly for the most vulnerable individuals, not all migrants depend on labour networks to find employment as well as not all of them rely on personal networks during the settlement process. The motives for return are linked to social, economic and institutional opportunities at home as well as by the relevance of migrants' own resources. Cross-border networks of social and economic relationships secure and sustain return migrants (e.g. Ruspini et al, 2016).

At last, the contribution to understand return migration drawing from transnationalism and the social network theory allows viewing return no longer at the end of the migration cycle but as one stage in the migration process. In fact, while recognising the influence of structural micro and macro factors in origin countries, both theoretical frameworks argue that the maintenance of linkages between receiving and origin countries fosters the ability of migrants to prepare and secure their own return (Cassarino, 2004). The social network theory goes a step further than the transnational approach contending that the cross-border social and economic networks are conducive to complementary exchange relations among actors, which go beyond the commonality of attributes since they are based on commonality of interests. Faist's (2000) idea of "community without propinquity" which links migrant social and symbolic ties to positions in networks and organizations in different geographical locations covering two or more nation-states is deemed important in this regard. Time-space compression is what makes similar social configurations possible and thus these relationships between contexts provide also a fertile ground for ongoing negotiation of rights and identities (Mapril and Araújo, 2002).

2. Migrants unbound? A brief methodological note

How to capture the complexity of the described migration processes? A mixed method approach has been envisaged as a suitable mean to detect changing migration trends either in Europe or worldwide. It includes a combination of desk research, policy analysis, qualitative and quantitative instruments at the macro, meso and micro level of investigation. As a broad knowledge base, a systematic collection of policy regulations is available, for instance, from the data generated by the Migrant Integration Policy Index 2015[1] and the ongoing collection of statistical

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[1] MIPEX: http://www.mipex.eu/

information on incoming migratory flows to Europe pertaining to the so called "refugee crisis" carried out by international organizations as the IOM or the UNHCR.

The responsiveness of the immigrant services and the current integration practices in addressing either the needs of the current mobile, return or resident migrant and refugee populations in Europe are to be assessed comparatively considering the interconnected contemporary migration and asylum framework as well as the extent of mixed flows. A comparative dimension has been proved useful in capturing and contrasting the diverse nuances and temporal stages of migration processes in European countries which, although to a different degree, are now all facing similar migration realities.

Data aim, first, to draw a picture of the transformation of the current European migration landscape by keeping into account the described migrant transnational configurations. Secondly, the impact of the present multimodal migration processes on immigrant integration and the integration policy framework at different level of governance lies at the core of a similar analysis, together with an attentive investigation on the mismatch between different policy levels. It is, in fact, often difficult to reach migration policy coherence considering the duplication of responsibilities and conflict of competences in several European national states between different governmental departments and between the latter and local and regional institutions. Thirdly, sketching return processes remains the most difficult empirical challenge since, as previously mentioned, there are no comparable national data on outgoing persons. The available micro quantitative surveys at regional level are useful in possibly detecting large processes but their interpretative value and comparative relevance is limited.

If many migrants are really "unbound", as our title's research question has posed, because of their migration history, transnational migrant constellations and possibly the resulting changing sense of belonging, it is even more difficult to frame similar ongoing processes by quantitative means. Quantitative analysis is not apt to appropriately frame mobile population dynamics if not supported by qualitative and ethnographic means. It is also difficult to make sense of and compare individuals with diverse migration or casual migratory paths behind as well as different migrant generations. In this regard, it is noteworthy mentioning that European national states address access to citizenship in diverse perspectives and according to very different national legislation.

The heterogeneity of migration, migratory flows and policies provides stimulating challenges for the researcher by inviting to an interdisciplinary work where the contribution from different disciplines is a major strength. As a matter of fact, social complexity can be better understood with a variety of disciplinary contributions whereas cooperation from diverse actors in the migration field, which do amass mutually enriching complimentary knowledge and experience, may adequately assist in designing coherent, comprehensive and proactive policies. The latter cooperation approach is the competitive advantage of longstanding dialogue fora at local, national and international level as, for instance, the Dialog Forum of the Danube University Krems at local level or the United Nations Global Compact on International Migration at global level.

In our view, multidisciplinary approaches in migration studies and multilateralism in migration policy are the only plausible responses to the current challenges originating from migration and the right answer to populistic instrumentalization from several political parties and governments in Europe and beyond. The whole of migrants will be indeed "unbound" not only when the politics and media discourse will fully take into consideration the sketched configurations of transnational migrant processes, but first and foremost when they will also adopt fair narratives in portraying migrants, refugees and minorities as well as a balanced human right' approach to the entire migration field.

3. Concluding remarks

This brief discussion has opened many research questions, but left also unanswered several of them. First, new empirical research based on mixed methods would be particularly profitable in further investigating the link between migrant transnationalism, the changing immigrant integration and return processes in several locations. Time and space of migration are of extreme importance in further understanding these migration dynamics. Only time and further investigation will clarify the durability of transnational ties.

Secondly, the focus of the article on transnationality should not offset the reality of the ageing first generation migrants with permanent residency in many European countries. The latter sample can be transnational as well when approaching their retirement age, but certainly to a different extent than other categories of mobile populations as the Erasmus or the new millennials' generations. Empirical research with a macro comparative perspective can help in elucidating these processes and the different migrants or mobile persons involved.

Thirdly, return migration remains a still underdeveloped research concept where traditional explicatory theories as the new economics and labour migration conflate with more innovative approaches as the sketched transnationalism and social networks' perspectives. At the macro level, the impact of both voluntary or forced return processes on countries and regions of origin still remains a widely unexplored field together with the nexus between migration and regional development. On the micro level, the same need for further research applies on the individual and family dynamics, their social networks, and questions related to the changing sense of belonging. Intersectoral research with a qualitative approach focused on class, ethnicity and gender can assist the researcher in better understanding these social processes in the manifold contexts of origin and destination. One caveat from former fieldworks is however worth mentioning here: the return of the highly skilled migrant usually implies a different narrative compared to that of the rejected asylum seeker or the low-skilled person belonging to an ethnic minority group. By avoiding any generalization, empirical data seem however to prove that the latter may possibly experience hardship and social exclusion and circulate again or re-migrate under diverse constraints than the individual belonging to a majority owing a different degree of social capital and material resources.

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