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IX POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SELF-CONSTITUTION: EDUCATION FOR DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN POST- PANDEMIC TIMES

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Edited by Andreia Giacomozzi, Irina Bondarevskaya

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Migration and Diversity – digital activism, identities and boundaries

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Introduction

‘People on the move’ is the mostly used neutral term envisioned to describe complexity of the phenomenon of mixed migrations. This term is all-inclusive and adequate to cover multiple identities of individuals who have different legal statuses: refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants and asylum seekers, irregular migrants – illegal entrants or overstayers, economic emigrants/immigrants, international students, and other. So, who is a ‘migrant’? The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) defines a migrant simply as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence”. But migration is a hugely complex issue which stimulates a wide range of controversial issues - from identity to ethnicity, religion, multiculturalism, integration, employment, welfare, education, housing and other. That is why intention of this paper is to explore broader context, dynamic and diversity of migrations, with the aim to understand the contemporary trends of social, economic, cultural and security changes caused by migrations.

Objectives

More specifically, this paper is intended to do four tasks. First, analysis is intended to explore the process of creation of different narratives on migration and how the popular discourses are reflecting diversity of identities. Second, analysis should scan what are capacities, strengths and weaknesses of human capital of migrants and how they could be empowered. Third, analysis will try to discover open spaces for alternative, constructive social and political activism of both migrants and native population in relation to migrant issues. Forth, analysis should explore what are obstacles - boundaries for development of diversity in migrations, and what are modern tools for boundarisation and securitization of migrations. These four tasks will be implemented mainly through desk analysis of the contemporary academic and research literature, international humanitarian organizations and media reports on migrations.

Results

Migrants are generally perceived as outsiders – people who do not belong to ‘our’ country, our state, and people for whom regular policies of our system ‘does not apply or work’.

This perception leads to the dehumanization of migrants who are rarely represented as ‘people like us’. Binary concepts such as: we/them, welcome/unwelcome, victims/villain, vulnerable/terrorists, etc. are frequently used, but not at all helpful in understanding migration issues and migrants’ identities. That is why it is helpful to refer to more detailed frame analysis of identities through which migrants are presented in public narratives – especially in (print) media. Analytically, the term ‘frame’ refers to the ways that speakers and writers construct arguments about certain topics and issues and give them a meaning. By framing, they link the topic to other events and issues and make value-judgements about its implications and impact on society (Goffman 1986). An in-depth review of the press in France and the United States conducted by Benson (2013) identified ten migration frames, grouping them as victim frames (a global economy frame, a humanitarian frame and a racism/xenophobia frame), hero frames (a cultural diversity frame, an integration frame and a good worker frame), and finally, threat frames (a jobs frame, a public order frame, a fiscal frame and a national cohesion frame). It seems that these frames persist as a ‘vintage vogue’ in media narratives on migrants in mainstream media.

It is true that massive migrations have tremendous costs, but also, they have benefits in the terms of human or social capital that migrants are transferring or can invest. Presumption that migrants are potential burden for welfare state was too long taken for granted, but new developments are presenting evidence that (im)migrants are becoming providers rather than clients of welfare system, especially during Covid-19 crisis, when they have been engaged as health care workers, especially in Europe. Their overall engagement in service sector, gives new perspective on their role of skillful brokers on labour markets, who are challenging traditional patterns of labour supplies. Traditionally, foreign-born workers are engaged as part-time or seasonal workforce in agriculture, services and maintenance, production, construction and transportation jobs. Nowadays, immigrants are becoming an increasingly important source of labour in so called gig-economy, where workers are engaged on short-term basis, and where immigrants could find precarious, but more qualified could find better paid jobs.

Still, immigrants are capable to empower themselves to develop new skills and their own strategies to raise their public voice by using digital technology and social network platforms. Good example is how delivery workers in New York who are, mainly, undocumented immigrants, heavily exploited by lucrative digital delivery applications and managements, and who are frequently robbed and attacked by thieves, although unprotected by police, despite of all these negative circumstances managed to organize themselves. With no

previous history of social or political activism, they are organizing alternative safety net, street rally actions when needed, and self-protection of their members (they launched *Los Deliveristas Unidos* Facebook page as a hub for their e-bikes theft alert, and for public advocacy of their causes).

New forms of digital activism are in the process of development worldwide, and people from different strands of society, both residents and migrants, are making important positive shift in public discourses on migration issues. Various grassroots, crowdfunding, rise-awareness, online petitions or humanitarian campaigns have been launched in digital – social network space, helping people to make a commitment to do something purposeful for better understanding of migrant problems and issues (for examples, see: Crawley & McMahon, 2016).

Migrants, especially those who are still ‘on the move’, are also using digital technology in innovative ways to empower themselves, by using their smartphones in a smart way, since messaging apps and social media are almost as valuable for migrants as food and shelter. Free of charge apps for on-line messaging and conversation, online maps, wi-fi hotspots and smartphone charging stations, wire money or remittances transfers, even those with the newest blockchain technology, are very powerful tools for modern migrants. Non-profit organization *REFUNITE* (with more than 1 million registered users) helps refugees to find missing family members via mobile phone or a computer, and AI-powered *Free Robot Lawyers* is offering legal help to migrants and refugees. Facebook Inc., which owns *WhatsApp*, allows people to use this app for exchange information about crossing borders, even illegally, but its policy bars posts that ask for money for services that facilitate human smuggling.

Dynamic and extension of migrations are bringing also new fundamental challenges to politicians and governments who are more focused how to deal with security of state borders and inflow of the great numbers of migrants. Juxtaposing of the issues of massive migration with security and issues of borders control leads to dystopian policy choices, such is introducing of ‘smart’ border solutions, that are employing artificial intelligence (AI) as an omnipotent component of migration management. For instance, the EU, the US and Canada invest in AI algorithms to automate decisions on asylum and visa applications and refugee resettlement. But this automated decision-making processes may contain many disadvantages such as bias, system failure and theft of data, that are collected from migrants and asylum seekers, even without their informed consent. In similar, migrants who are trying to enter the EU - Western Europe have no control on their biometric data collected from them to the EURODAC (European asylum dactyloscopy database of biometric data).

Furthermore, at the US-Mexico, or Greece-Turkish border, for example, the border officers are using various smart border and virtual wall solutions such as satellites, drones and radar sensors, with facial recognition technologies to monitor migrants before they even reach the border. All described tools empowered by AI technology constitute what Latonero and Kift (2018) define as infrastructure of ‘digital passages’ – “sociotechnical spaces for global movement in which refugees, smugglers, governments, and corporations interact with each other and with new technologies.”

Conclusions

Many things may be uncertain, but one thing is predictable: migration, diversity and securitization will remain key issues in the near future, and beyond. It is likely to expect that further development of digital technology will bring new post-modern modes of social and economic behavioral changes of migrants, but also it will bring technically more sophisticated tools for their control. What is the most striking is that digital borders are becoming inscribed in human body – system of biometric data collection and control of digital footprints of any individual will determine boundaries of international mobility of particular person and frame his/her human identity.

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