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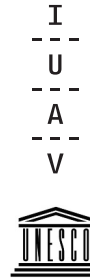
NOT JUST PASSING THROUGH: INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN CITIES OF 'TRANSIT COUNTRIES'

Giovanna Marconi

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SSIIM SOCIAL AND SPATIAL INCLUSION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS-URBAN POLICIES AND PRACTICE

NOT JUST PASSING THROUGH: INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN CITIES OF 'TRANSIT COUNTRIES'

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Objectives

Starting with the observation that transit migration only recently became a matter of relevant concern for the discourse on international migration, this paper aims at exploring i) the reasons behind the growing political attention towards this issue and ii) the consequences and side-effects the politicization of this phenomenon generates in the crucial points of transit routes, i.e. cities of transit countries.

It will question whether transit migration is just an important feature of modern human mobility or rather a political construction aimed at influencing involved stakeholders and leading them to collaborate in a global strategy of migration management. It's a matter of space and time: how these are framed, and by which actors, to obtain specific effects.

The cases of Tijuana in Mexico and Istanbul in Turkey, where the author carried out field research in 2008 and 2009, will be used to explore the local processes activated by the introduction of the category 'transit migration'. In particular it will be highlighted how international geopolitical interests are affecting the way in which cities react and respond to the presence of international migrants and, as a consequence, what migrants' modes of incorporation are in the urban social and spatial fabric.

Transit migration, an object of policy still lacking clear definition

The category 'transit migration' is relatively a 'new entry' within the political and scientific debate on human mobility. The contemporary concept of *international migration* was developed in the period between the First and Second World Wars, when modern nation states started to address the phenomenon in their policies and the social sciences began to conceptualize it in their theories (Wimmer and Glick Skiller, 2002). The 'invention of the passport' itself dates back to this same period. In fact the institutionalization of the idea of the nation-state as a prospectively homogeneous ethno-cultural unit was a project that inevitably entailed efforts to regulate and control people's access to territorial spaces by monopolization of the right to authorize their movements (Torpey, 2000). The problematization of international migration and the related discourses concerning its developments, trends, impacts, possible strategies and stances to be adopted for governing it, have largely been polarized into two well defined (and definable) physical places: the country of *origin* and

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the one of *destination*. The main actors of cross-border movements were also classified within two dichotomous categories: *emigrants*, i.e. those who left their country of birth to settle elsewhere, and *immigrants*, i.e. those residing in a country other than the one they were born in. What was in the middle was just 'the journey', which could have been more or less dangerous, long and expensive depending on the traveller's economic means, the distance to be covered and the transportation technology available in the historical period concerned.

Receiving countries' policies in the field of immigration control have been markedly territorialized, their domain for action ending at the boundaries of the nation-state. Bilateral agreements between the countries of origin and destination later became the main extra-territorial, international measures introduced in the attempt to govern migration flows in such a way as to, at least in theory, maximize the benefits and reduce the costs for both sides.[1] The countries crossed by migrants during their journey and the routes used to reach their desired destination were not necessarily part of the scenario taken into consideration.

Instead, at the beginning of the '90s the concept of 'transit migration' suddenly and firmly enters the migration policy discourse and 'transit country' starts to be commonly used in the migration lexicon as an intermediate category besides migrants' country of origin and destination (Marconi, 2009). This same period also coincides with a phase of enlargement and diversification of the fields of enquiry concerning the several dimensions of international migration. Circular migration, refugees flows mixed with economic ones, remittances, international networks and practices: these and many others empirically observed features began to be taken into consideration as 'new' important dimensions of today cross border movements. The theory of migration studies introduced new paradigms – i.e. transnationalism, diasporas, co-development, glocalization - to describe such an increasingly complex, multifaceted and multiterritorial reality.

On the one hand, these new approaches started to undermine the many deep-rooted dichotomous categories until then adopted for defining the different aspects of international migration, i.e. permanent vs temporary, forced vs free, legal vs illegal, assimilation vs multiculturalism (Düvell, 2006b). On the other, the work of many authors focusing on migration in a globalized world (Tarrius, Portes, Sassen, Bauman), lead one to question the basic spatial units of analysis used to frame and mainstream the phenomenon: inter-national migration – as its prefix 'inter' suggests - encompasses multiple places hardly circumscribable to the territory of a single nation state. Nothwistanding, migration dichotomies are still deeply embedded in migration policies and *methodological nationalism* - i.e. the reduction of the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation states, no matter whether it is the state of origin, transit or destination (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) - permeates migration policies and regimes.

In the case of 'transit migration' it is significant to note that, once observed, this specific pattern of human mobility has become a taken-for-granted characteristic of international migration - and thus a special object of migration policymaking - without an exhaustive problematization of its nature and causes. Transit migration debate is occurring along two dimensions: a theoretical one, i.e. the scientific effort to describe an existing reality; and a political one, i.e. the discursive construction of that same reality (Içduygu, 2008), mainly used to justify taking action against it.

The few authors (Düvell, Den Haas, Collyer) working to provide deeper insights on the mechanisms and rationalities lying behind the appearance and affirmation of transit migration as an important feature of modern human mobility, agree in observing that while the attention, action and efforts are diverted on problem-solving and on providing answers rather than raising questions, a sort of epistemological and methodological vacuum characterizes the 'transit migration' field. Despite the growing use of 'transit terminology', prompted by the attempt by most popular receiving countries to stop migration flows before they reach them, there are not yet universally agreed definitions of what exactly is meant for 'transit migration', 'transit country' and 'transit migrant'. International policy or law still does not provide a category or classification for them, and the definitions up to now embraced and currently used by institutions and scholars addressing the phenomenon are rather vague (Düvell, 2006a).

As Aspasia Papadopoulou observes, transit migration shouldn't even be considered as a migrant category since it is *'a phase that cuts across various migrant categories: irregular migrants, asylum seekers, refugees granted asylum, regularized migrants, students, trafficked persons may all find themselves in the condition of transit at some point'* (Papadopoulou, 2008).

There are three main variables to be taken into consideration when analyzing what happens in the middle between emigration and immigration: space, time and the migration plan. The spatial and temporal dimensions are relatively more objectively identifiable and measurable than the last one. A person might be considered a migrant in transit when staying in a 'transit country' (*tc*), which territory is placed between the country of emigration (*ce*) and the one of immigration (*ci*) for a limited period of time that could be conventionally determined, i.e. 6 months. From the conceptual point of view, the subject is however more complex, since the 'condition' under study (i.e. being in transit) is highly dependent upon the third variable, i.e. migrants' 'personal intention' of using a certain national territory as gateway towards another.
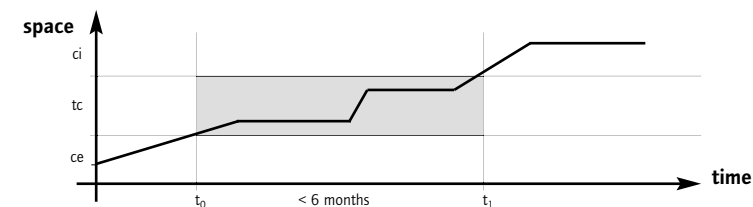
The boundary between transit and immigration is thus impossible to pinpoint, unless migrants themselves voice a desire to move into the territory of a different State (De Tapia, 2004). If their target destination is an EU country or the US, where legal entry channels are today extremely limited, any intention to depart from a state neighbouring them basically coincides with finding an illegal way to cross borders, thus it is highly improbable that transit migrants show up as such. And even in the case they express their intention to move further, it would be difficult to state if their project is really feasible or just a dream, and thus if they can really be classified as 'transit migrants' or rather as 'immigrants by default'.

For these reasons, any quantification of the phenomenon in due course is impossible. Exact information on transit 'experiences' can be obtained only *a posteriori*, i.e. when the transit through a certain country has already happened. And this would anyway miss capturing the whole picture as it does not provide any information on those who did not make it and are still 'lost in transit'.

Overmore, the growing assumption that migrants in countries neighbouring the most popular destinations in the global North are there just to transit, overshadows the relevance of other existing migration patterns i.e. *south-to-south international migration* and *step by step migration* or *migration in stages*.[2] The presence of foreigners in a given territory can indeed have many different meanings and it depends very much on where you stand when you look at it and why you look at it (with what intention).

Nevertheless, transit migration not only has become of growing concern for the European Union and the United States, but it is also increasingly central in their migration policy-making. Before looking for a proper definition, we should hence take a step back and observe from a broader framework the political construction of the issue 'transit migration' and the geopolitical interests lying behind the apparently innocent 'naming' of an action, i.e. transiting. There is the need to understand and evaluate the reasons why, at a certain point of time, this specific pattern of human mobility was noticed and given priority, and which particular analysis of its features guided the elaboration of specific policy responses. In fact, defining a particular issue in a particular way leads to specific answers to what is highlighted as a problem. The assumption here is that migration policy-making in the field of transit is not the rational determination of the optimal solution to an objectively given problem. National interests and strategic political objectives determine what is considered as a policy problem, how it is defined and what policy responses are deemed adequate. Indeed, concerns about irregular immigration are embedded in many other policy fields. Western governments and agencies have included measures targeting transit migration in a range of policies, i.e. FDI, development aid, trade agreements.

The power of naming: a concept imposed from outside

It is significant to note that the emergence of transit migration as a policy issue was not pushed by those actors mostly affected by the phenomenon, i.e. the countries transited by migrants. Since the very beginning, those more interested in defining, mapping, addressing and, most of all, curbing transit migration have indeed been the countries of final destination of these flows, in particular the European Union and the United States, which at a certain point started to label their Southern neighbours as 'transit countries'.

In terms of place, the 'transit migration' discourse is western. The studies and concerns regarding transit migration are not focused on the impacts the supposedly growing presence of temporary migrants has on the cities and societies of the so called transit countries. The problematization of 'what happens in the middle' is patently not functional to understand and cope with the effects *there* but rather instrumental to stop the last crossing towards *here*.

The reasons why transit migration started to be considered a salient feature of human mobility are indeed deeply embedded in the relatively recent affirmation of the nation-state and the ways in which national framing of reality shaped the dominant political approaches towards international migration (Wimmer and Glik Schiller, 2002).

There is usually a multiplicity of variables which dynamically interact to 'produce' different types, channels and outcomes of migration; and one of the most significant of these variables is migration policy (Vertovec, 2007). In the case of transit migration, both the phenomenon itself and its political construction are strongly related to the increasing securitization of migration regimes in Western countries, driven by the container model of society embedded in the modern nation-state project. Since the beginning of the '90s, protection and patrolling of external borders against unwanted migration is among the top priorities of national security agendas for both the US and the EU. Considerable efforts are made and significant funds invested to enforce this goal. Fences are being erected. Transit migration has to be read as a strategic response to the increasingly restrictive control regimes and lack of coherent admission policies in the most popular target destinations, and part of a complex interaction between migrants' autonomy and states' sovereignty (Düvell, 2006b).

The meaning attached to border demarcation, control and walling is multidimensional. It involves political principles (the affirmation of the nation as a domain of identity), symbols (the territorial sovereignty and ownership of the State) and emotions (fears for uncontrolled population movements, perception of security) (Düvell, 2006b). Borders determine the nature of group belonging, affiliation and membership, and the way in which the process of inclusion and exclusion are institutionalized (Newman, 2006). The zero-immigration policy model pursued by Western countries produced a series of side effects and triggered a vicious circle

(more controls − new strategies to bypass them − more controls) leading to the rising criminalization of international migrants and an exponential growth of their vulnerability. These side effects are often justified as unintended consequences of restrictive immigration policies. However, as Cornelius observes, there is an evident gap between stated policy objectives and outcomes (i.e. in immigration policies that seek to stem the flows). And policy gaps materialize into empirical effects. The resulting 'unintended consequences' may not be so unintended, or may be in fact fully intended (Cornelius, 1995). The examples of Mexico and Turkey will be used to understand these developments.

First of all, growing numbers of would-be migrants intentioned to reach the EU and US started heading towards countries neighbouring them, in the hope of finding there an easier way to cross further north (side effect No. 1: *the emergence of transit countries*). Entering such countries was in fact not so difficult: visa regimes were relatively free and border controls nearly inexistent since immigration was not perceived there as a problem nor an issue. It is the case of migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, but also South America (mostly Argentina, Colombia, and Peru), the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, Asia (principally China and Korea) and Africa, crossing Mexico on their way towards the US. Similarly Turkey's territory started to be used as a gateway towards the EU by migrants from Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries, in particular Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Palestine and Somalia, and more recently also from Maghreb, Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India.

Nevertheless, leaving the 'would-be transit country' often ends up not being so easy nor affordable. The growing complexities in crossing borders irregularly forced migrants to rely more and more on the services provided by smugglers. Criminal networks proliferated, making huge profits from smuggling human beings across international frontiers (side effect No.2: *people smuggling and trafficking becomes the fastest growing criminal business in the world*). In northern Mexico the polleros or coyotes, who were traditionally local residents charging US$200 to show Mexican migrants 'where to run to', usually on the same day of their arrival at the border-crossing point, were inevitably replaced by criminal organizations, better equipped to bypass the enhanced controls for both Mexican and foreign 'customers'. Now smugglers charge between 1,500 and 3,500 US$ for 'crossing to the other side'. A passage from Turkey to Greece costs between 1,000 and 3,000 US$.[3] In both cases, migrants with 'good contacts' might pay less than half of those without them for the same trip. Of course, smugglers' fares are inversely proportional to the danger (in terms of risk of life) of the crossing. A passage to Greece by land, or to the US with forged documents, is much more expensive than going by rusty boats or walking through the desert.

Once the EU and US realized that more and more migrants from an increasingly diverse and often distant array of countries of origin, were using states placed at their fringes as gateways to their national territory, they started to i) hold them responsible for preventing transit flows; ii) criminalize transit migration labeling it as illegal/irregular/clandestine. Categorizing these neighbors as 'transit countries' and accusing them of 'transit migration' was used as a strategy to legitimize putting pressure on to persuade them to collaborate in filtering migration flows and readmitting intercepted irregular migrants. It is the so called 'externalization' of migration controls. On their side, countries found to be transited by migrants promptly exploited the unexpected bargaining power this situation was offering to them, using their possible cooperation in controlling transit flows as a means of parallel diplomacy to put forward other strategic political objectives.

The case of EU-Turkey

In 1993 the UN organized two conferences on 'The study of transit migration in Central Europe', addressing the 'alarming increase' of irregular migrants passing through East European countries and CIS republics on their way towards Western Europe. In this framework, transit migration was defined as '*migration in one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination*' (UN/ECE, 1993). It was however the International Organization for migration (IOM), which mostly prompted the framing of transit migration as an increasingly problematic pattern of today's international mobility. Through a series of country papers published between 1993 and 1995,[4] IOM warned its member states against the challenges posed by transit migration, given the high levels of irregularity supposedly characterizing it.

Since then, the calls for including transit migration as a priority issue within the EU and its member states' immigration policy agendas multiplied. Virtually all the countries forming a belt at the EU's periphery have been labelled as 'transit countries' on several institutional gatherings and by different bodies. The need for engaging these neighbours in migration control has been increasingly stressed. In 1999 it was the newly established EU High Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration which in a series of action plans put emphasis on transit routes crossing the Balkan and Mediterranean countries that should have been involved as partners in the process of controlling and regulating transit migration (Van Selm, 2002). The Ministerial Conference of the 5+5 Dialogue on Migration in the Western Mediterranean[5] was established in 2002 as an attempt to forward a joint management of the increasing transit flows passing through Northern African countries (Düvell, 2006b), while two years later the council of Europe organized in Istanbul a Regional Conference on 'Migrants in the transit countries: sharing responsibilities in management and protection' (Council of Europe,

2004). The choice of the venue itself was not fortuitous. Since the 1995 IOM report, Turkey is considered one of the most important transit countries and, given its position as candidate EU member, it has been under growing pressure from the EU for a radical reform of its legal and institutional framework on immigration and asylum management.

The alignment of Turkey's migration policies (and practices) with the EU *migration acquis* is among the compulsory conditions for the accession to the Union. EU concern in setting priorities for Turkey in the field of migration is definitely centered on security. In particular Turkey is expected to intensify border controls, align its relatively liberal visa system to that of the Shengen Area, improve and intensify its cooperation in preventing illegal migration and establish new reception and return centers for intercepted migrants.

To comply with the EU recommendations, Turkey adopted in 2005 the National Action Plan for Asylum and Migration, a formal commitment on the measures it would undertake for harmonizing its migration regime with the EU policies. The Turkish authorities set up an 'integrated border management projects department' and a unit responsible for risk analysis in customs administration. In addition they opened new sea and air border checkpoints in strategic border crossing areas. Bilateral readmission agreements were signed with Greece in 2003 and Romania in 2004, while negotiations are ongoing with the European Commission regarding an EU-wide readmission agreement.

In parallel to the negotiations for accessing the EU, the number of irregular migrants apprehended in Turkey increased steadily, peaking at 94,500 in 2000. An annual average of 20 to 30 thousand apprehensions was registered before 1999, then stabilizing around 60 thousand per year from 2004 onwards.

The case of US-Mexico

In the same years, the US became increasingly concerned with the growing numbers of OTMs, Other Than Mexican nationals, illegally entering the country through its southern border. Mexico, traditionally the main sending country, started to be addressed also as a transit one. The Regional Conference on Migration, the multilateral regional forum on migration taking place since 1996,[6] has been the major venue where the increasing role of some central American states as transit countries was emphasized and problematized.

Until the late 1980s, the Mexican southern boundary with Guatemala and Belize was known as 'la frontera olvidada' (the forgotten border). Since the 1990s, however, under strong diplomatic pressure from the United States and facilitated by the willingness of Mexico to convince a skeptical U.S. Congress that it would be a responsible partner in NAFTA, the government has drastically increased its efforts to curb transit migration. On average over 100,000 Central Americans per year were

apprehended in the 1990s compared to only 10,000 per year repatriated during the previous decade.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the administration of Vincente Fox engaged in new interdiction efforts in Mexico's southern states, with the clear intention of persuading the U.S. government to regularize the legal status of the 6 to 8 million undocumented Mexicans who were then living in the United States. 'Coyote 2000' and the 'Plan Sur' (Southern Plan) in 2001 were Mexico's main attempts at reducing human smuggling and irregular migration through its southern borders. Plan Sur dispatched hundreds of immigration agents there and employed also the military in the detection of undocumented migrants and smugglers.

The government earned much criticism with these actions that not only failed to stop transit migration but were negatively perceived by Mexican public opinion as emulating the criticized U.S. policy of militarizing borders. As a result the government withdrew from this strategy and opted for a new tactic, namely the intensification of internal controls along highways and transportation routes. Mexico has today one hundred and seventy-two official interdiction points, fifty-two INM (Mexican National Institute for Migration) migration stations and more than 50 detention centers for irregular migrants. The number of irregular migrants intercepted in Mexico rose to 240,200 in 2005 from 138,000 in 2002, according to INM.

The vicious circle and the other side-effects

Stricter border controls followed by externalization of migration policies and gate-keeping efforts made by transit countries merely channelled undocumented migration to other routes, forcing migrants to choose longer and more dangerous itineraries to reach their destination (side effect No.3: *extension and diversification of migration routes, translating into hazardous journeys*). Recently, a surge in detected irregular crossings along the Greek-Turkish land border was registered, as only 9,000 migrants were captured in 2009 compared with 34,000 in the first nine months of 2010 (+369%). In the same period apprehensions in the hyper-patrolled Aegean sea dropped by 76%.[7] The growth of irregular flows through this corridor is the consequence of the progressive closure of more direct routes in the southern Mediterranean, namely the traditional path from Morocco to Spain, then the one from West Africa to the Canary Islands where irregular migration flows had diverted after the intensification of patrols in the British Channel and, more recently, the one from Libya to Italy as a consequence of the "friendship treaty" reached between the two countries in autumn 2008 which allows the immediate refoulement to Libya of migrants intercepted by the Italian coastguard.

Along the US-Mexican border, the areas where undocumented migrants crossed were progressively shifted to regions far removed from urban areas, the road system, and the possibility of rescue (Santibañez Romellón,

9. The law explicitly mentioned 'Foreign Kurds, Arabs, Albanians; other Muslims who speak languages other than Turkish and all foreign Christians and Jews'

10. An amendment was made to the Ley General de Poblacion that decriminalize undocumented immigration to Mexico, which is now a minor offense punishable by fines but no more with incarceration up to 10 years as it was before.

2004). After triple-fencing was constructed in San Diego, apprehensions of undocumented immigrants fell from 450,000 in 1994 to 100,000 in 2002, but illegal crossers intercepted in the Tucson sector increased more than 300% during the same period (Ackleson, 2005). More than 5,000 migrants died during the crossing since the construction of the wall started pushing migrants into dangerous desert terrain. In the same period (1995-2008), more than 1,000 migrants have drowned in the Aegean Sea in the attempt to reach Greek islands (Marconi, 2009). In total, at least 15,500 migrants died along the EU frontiers between 1988 and 2010.[8]

Since each new enhancement of border controls raises the cost of travel and makes smuggling fares higher, many migrants 'in transit' get stranded for long periods along their way trying to make up the sum for the next leg of their trip. 'Transit' is hence transformed into an insecure type of long-term settlement, with growing numbers of migrants ending up in a situation of stale mate without the immediate opportunity of reaching their target destination nor, as it is often the case, to go back home (side effect No. 4: *immigration by default*).

Mexico and Turkey are indeed countries of emigration, transit and immigration. However the self image is much more as the first in the case of Mexico and as the second in the case of Turkey. In both cases, the immigration component is seldom taken into consideration. The taken-for-granted assumption that migrants 'do not immigrate there', and that those arriving are there only temporarily, precludes any problematization of immigration.

The migration laws in force in the two countries are either outdated or influenced by external pressures to collaborate in filtering unwanted flows, which reinforces the framing of migration management as a matter of control and security preventing any consideration on the positive and negative impacts the presence of immigrants might bring to the transit countries themselves.

The fundamental law that shapes migration and asylum policy in Turkey is still the Law on Settlement, which dates back to the '30s. According to this law, only individuals of 'Turkish race or culture' can legally immigrate to the country. All the others[9] are to be considered 'foreigners', not eligible to obtain Turkish nationality. Although some amendments were made in 2006, the definition of who has to be considered a foreigner did not change. Those who are not of 'Turkish descent and culture' are still deemed as ineligible for permanent immigration (Samuk, 2010). But even obtaining a temporary residence permit is a costly and highly bureaucratic process (Içduygu and Biehl, 2011).

Existing Mexican law on migration (Ley General de Población) is more than 30 years old and is far removed from reality. It is not only inapplicable but it has been largely criticized for making room for oversights and for providing an advantageous framework to perpetrate extortion from migrants in transit (Santibañez Romellón, 2004). Although Mexican

human rights activists achieved a first important goal in 2008,[10] a radical immigration reform is still greatly needed.

Even if unable to get a residence permit, whether because intentioned to settle there or forced to stay by circumstances, it is a fact that many migrants indeed live in cities of the so called 'transit countries'. Some of their main urban areas are crucial hubs of the transnational territories including migrants' trajectories, points of connection of complicated networks, linkage between spaces. The problem is that there is an enormous lack of awareness and information on foreigners residing in these cities.

Istanbul and Tijuana. The non-problematization of immigration at the local level.

Two antithetical, highly symbolic, physical marks strongly distinguish the urban space of Tijuana (Mexico) and Istanbul (Turkey). The entire northern border of Tijuana is a wall, with which the city literally seems to clash. The vast, unplanned, spread urban area comes to an abrupt and artificial end against this line separating the first and the third world. In contrast, the bridges across the Bosphorus, which connect Istanbul's Asian and European sides, besides linking de facto two continents, are broadly used as a metaphor for bridging civilizations. Nevertheless, for migrants in transit willing to reach the US or the EU, these cities often become their last stop, the only 'second best' option in their migration projects. Many others, arriving with the intention of settling here, struggle with the widespread prejudice that they are just passing through and have limited possibilities, at least formally, of regularizing their presence and being accepted by the local society.

At first glance, comparing a relatively new border town like Tijuana with a metropolis with the historic background of Istanbul might appear unreasonable. However, the two urban contexts share many similarities in terms of migration patterns and the political approach towards the issue. Due to booming industrialization and constant economic growth, both cities have grown very fast during the past decades. At the turn of the 20th century, Istanbul had an estimated population of one million people. With a population of 12.5 million people, Istanbul accounted in 2008 for nearly 18 percent of Turkey's total population (Biehl, 2011). In the year 1900 Tijuana was nothing more than a small village with 242 residents. One hundred years later it was among the eight most important cities in Mexico, with an estimated population of 1.2 million people (Alegria and Ordonez, 2005). According to the year 2000 censuses data, nearly 63 percent of Istanbul's population and up to 48 percent of Tijuana residents were not born in these cities. Given the rapid urbanization process experienced, both are considered in the collective imaginary as 'cities of migrants'. However, this deep-rooted perception evidently refers to internal rather than international migrants.

While in the cities of the South internal and international migrants often share analogous precarious living conditions and suffer similar problems of social, spatial and economic exclusion, the situation of the latter is usually much more problematic (Marconi, 2005). Due to the absence of adequate immigration policies or the inconsistency of existing legislation, the legal status of international migrants remains questionable. Even for those willing to do so, the chances of being registered as regular immigrants upon entry or to regularize their presence once settled are nearly inexistent. Lacking the very right to be there, foreign residents are more vulnerable than the local poor to social and spatial exclusion as well as severe exploitation, harassment and infringement of their human rights. They usually have limited access to jobs, housing and health services, and a weak capacity to refer to the authorities to claim basic rights to dignity and personal security (Roman, 2006).

In the cities of the so called 'transit countries', the lack of awareness and information about the presence of increasing numbers of international migrants among the urban residents is even more difficult to overcome than in cities of other developing countries where receiving immigrants is a relatively recent phenomenon. The issue of international immigration is practically absent from the political agenda of cities like Tijuana and Istanbul, not just because – as is the case in other developing countries – the number of foreign residents is still not so relevant (1 or 2% of the total urban population) even if growing, but also, and mainly, because it is taken for granted that there are no immigrant residents in these cities. On the one side, the widespread prejudice that migrants mean just to pass through, prevents i) looking at international immigration as a structural element of the urban society and ii) the development of any public policy or initiative to cope with the challenges their integration might pose to urban governance. Hence, as Annah Arendt observed for stateless people, migrants in transit - or those considered as such - are de facto deprived of the 'right to have rights', first of all that of existing and being part of a community. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them (Arendt, 1966)

The pressures from outside to curb 'irregular' flows and the obligation local governments have to enforce national guidelines against transit migration, lead to the introduction of repressive measures and controls against migrants, often with no other result than a worsening of their living conditions.

Though immigration is not perceived as an issue, the efforts and resources employed in fighting irregular migration are noticeable in both cities. Around 15 to 25 per cent of all apprehended irregular migrants in Turkey are caught in Istanbul (AAVV, 2008). In Tijuana, access to the city from its southern main points of entry - i.e. the central bus station, 'la Rumorosa' highway and the airport - are hyper-patrolled. INM agents assert that they refuse to act as gatekeepers of the United States. However at Tijuana airport any foreigner (and in particular those arriving from developing countries) not able to demonstrate to '*a valid reason to come here*', is rejected, including those holding regular visas for temporary stay in Mexico. 'None of them comes to Tijuana for tourism' officers say 'their real intention is to try crossing into the US'. An average of 1,000 migrants 'in transit' a year are apprehended in Tijuana by Mexican authorities.

Another element showing that migration control is a priority is the presence in both Tijuana and Istanbul of detention centres for apprehended irregular migrants. Tijuana's 'migratory station' (estación migratoria) was built in 2003 and can host up to 300 detainees. They are usually imprisoned for a few weeks until they reach a sufficient number to fill a bus that will transfer them to Mexico city detention centres, from where they will be repatriated.

In Turkey, detention centers for migrants are called 'foreigners' guesthouses', despite their evident function as prisons for irregular migrants. The Foreigners Guest House in Istanbul was opened in 2007 in Kumkapi, one of the central neighbourhoods of the historic peninsula known for the high concentration of migrant residents of African origin. The name of the center was recently changed into 'Kumkapi Return Center' by the Ministry of Interior, to stress its function in the fight against illegal immigration. In Turkey, there is no established maximum limit on the duration of administrative detention for irregular migrants. Non-citizens awaiting deportation tend to be detained for anywhere between a few days and more than a year until their relatives are able to pay for their repatriation costs (AAVV, 2008). Hence, while the capacity of Kumkapi guesthouse is of 560 migrants (360 for males and 200 for females), the number of detainees is usually much higher, and the conditions quite harsh as denounced by different observers (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, IOM).

Generally speaking, both Tijuana and Istanbul, are highly policed – almost militarized - cities. While in the case of Tijuana the massive police presence is due to the high levels of crime connected to narcotraffic cartels' cross-border activities, in Istanbul its omnipresent visibility is used as a deterrent in the enforcement of public law and order. In the field of illegal immigration control, in both Tijuana and Istanbul there is evidence of limited institutional capacity to prevent or counter the abuse of power exerted by the same authorities responsible for it. The increasing criminalization of irregular migration not only leads many policemen to feel it is legitimate to take severe action to contrast it, but leaves space for abuse against migrants.

It is widely documented that corrupt police officials perpetuate an alarming number of extortions on undocumented migrants. Lack of papers makes them extremely vulnerable to blackmail, and keeps them in constant fear of arrest and deportation that undermines their fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right to meet in public

11. A typical expression used by agents to bribe migrants is asking to be invited for a 'chesco', a colloquial Mexican way of saying 'refresco', i.e. a soft-drink

spaces. For instance in Istanbul, irregular African migrants living in Tarlabaşı, a central highly rundown neighbourhood located right next to the modern commercial and cultural heart of the city, have self-imposed a sort of curfew: they generally remain confined in their shanty lodgings after eight in the night in order to avoid police harassment. Many of them say it is quite common for migrants to be forced into a police car overnight, taken to isolated areas, frisked and robbed of the little money and valuables they have with them.

In Tijuana the situation is rather similar. Nearly every day the municipal police comb the streets in front of the city's hostels for migrants, threatening those found without documents with incarceration or deportation as a means to obtain bribes.[11] Though only INM agents and the Federal Preventive Police are legally authorized to detain undocumented foreigners, several other law enforcement bodies, including the municipal police, anti-narcotics police, the military, private police forces and even tax authorities (i.e. nearly everybody wearing a police-like uniform) have been reportedly involved in the extortion of migrants. Despite the local office of the National Commission on Human Rights filing formal complaints against the municipality, and despite several meetings took place convening local authorities and human rights activists, abuses are reported to continue.

In the name of security, transit migrants stranded in cities like Tijuana and Istanbul are forced to live in a sort of limbo, between a present yet to pass and a future yet to come, while the criminalization of migration also negatively affects those who came with the intention of staying.

'Invisibilization' and the strategy of 'pretending to be'

The neglect of 'immigration' as one of the components of urban society, coupled with the increasing criminalization of irregular migration, leaves migrants in cities of 'transit countries' - whether on a temporary or permanent basis - with few other options other than keeping a low profile and trying to be invisible. This translates into a sort of vicious circle in which *institutional invisibility* feeds *intentional invisibility* and vice-versa. The former is the result of lack of problematization of 'immigration'. Most immigrants are never counted in official statistics, there is little awareness of, nor interest for, their presence hence they are not taken into consideration as part of the urban population in local policy-making and are de facto excluded from the 'right to the city'. Intentional invisibility is, on the other hand, the principal strategy adopted by migrants themselves who, being under constant fear of apprehension, internment and deportation, have to devise unconventional practices of incorporation into the local society (Ostanel, 2009), usually confined to the informal sphere. Not being conspicuous is the main concern for all migrants with uncertain legal status: those in transit who try to leave as soon as possible, those who arrived with the intention of moving on but ended up stranded, those

who voluntarily choose the city where they are as their target destination but are unable to gain a permit to stay. Their constant efforts not to be recognized as what they are, i.e. immigrants, generate unconventional modes of integration, belonging and socialization. Many cities of the so called transit countries became sort of laboratories in which the art of surviving is experimented daily through 'invisibilization' and the strategy of 'pretending to be'. Invisibility leads migrants to change their role within the host society, but not their identity, thus questioning such categories as 'citizen' versus 'alien' (Ostanel, 2010).

In Tijuana, although the Chinese are estimated to be the most numerous immigrant group, reaching up to 9 thousand people, the 2000 census did not register a single person born in China. It is believed that many simply avoided the officials in charge of the door-to-door census questionnaire, while others probably refused to speak Spanish or denied being foreigners (Alegría, 2005). Chinese born residents in Tijuana also avoid any form of manifestation of their presence. Their neighborhoods do not show evident ethnic traits nor the traditional symbols that might lead to identify these areas as 'Chinatowns'. They do use public space for their national or religious celebrations. The most important of their traditional holidays, the Chinese New Year Eve which sees more than 1,000 participants congregating in Tijuana every year, is organized in a closed locale rather than in the streets. In a nutshell, their presence is visible only for the 250 Chinese restaurants in the city (Alegría, 2005).

On the other hand, either when attempting to cross illegally to the US or falling back to live in Tijuana, pretending to be Mexican is the most adopted strategy by Latin American migrants, facilitated in their *camouflage* by their cultural, racial and linguistic background which is very similar to that of local people. Since Mexico did not sign a readmission agreement with the US, being apprehended by the US border patrol would mean being directly repatriated to the country of origin. Pretending to be Mexican provides the opportunity of being sent back just to the other side of the wall, in Tijuana, where they stay until the next attempt at crossing. Much more than the US border patrol agents, 'fake Mexican migrants' fear being unmasked by INM officers at San Ysidro port of entry, who are in charge of controlling the nationality of those forcibly 'returned' by the US. In order to cheat Mexican officers, migrants learn the Mexican national hymn, the typical words and traditional foods of the Mexican city they declare they come from. Often it is the smugglers themselves who provide key instructions or even a sort of 'intensive course' on how to pretend to be a Mexican. They also advise on the city migrants should state as their place of origin, depending on their physical and ethnic traits, i.e. Acapulco for Cubans since people there have darker skin or Oaxaca for those with indigenous traits.

INM officers usually prefer to turn a blind eye to suspected non Mexicans, and interrogations to determine the real nationalities of deported

migrants are quite uncommon. This *tacitly acknowledged mutual misunderstanding* - i.e. we both know this is not the truth but we both pretend we believe it is the truth (La Cecla, 1997) - is deeply embedded in this borderland space. For example, once returned to the Mexican side all migrants are offered medical aid and support (i.e. food, water, information on where they can find temporary shelter, etc.) by NGOs as well as social services, which do not question the declared identity or nationality of the people they assist, even when it is noticeably false.

For those who end up settling in Tijuana permanently, stating they are Mexican continues to be the easiest way to avoid migration controls and to skip the long bureaucracy required for regularizing their status. Most of them buy a forged Mexican ID and smoothly mix in with the local population, or simply vanish by living in the widespread irregular settlements and working in the informal market (Marconi, 2009).

While in Tijuana it is the similarity of most migrants with the local population that makes camouflage easy, in Istanbul becoming invisible might be even simpler given the diversity and crowdedness of the city.

From a legal point of view, passing as a tourist or an asylum seeker are the only practicable ways of getting an authorization to stay, even if temporarily. Obtaining residence and work permits in Turkey is so complicated and expensive that even highly skilled immigrants usually prefer to use a tourist visa, which they renew every 3 months by leaving and re-entering the country. The same strategy is adopted by the numerous 'suitcase traders' from the former Soviet bloc who, since the 80s, fuel significant circular migration flows between Turkey and their countries of origin. They de facto reside in Istanbul, employed by or running their own business in the flourishing textile industry,[12] but never show up as nor are counted as 'immigrants' (Içduygu and Biehl, 2011).

Low skilled economic migrants and those intending just to pass through who have ended up stranded in Istanbul, generally cannot afford frequent journeys to the border, and have hence little choice but to overstay their tourism visa and settle irregularly. Pretending to be an asylum seeker is the only available alternative, a condition which is however becoming more and more uncomfortable. In fact, besides the risk of being deported if not eligible for refugee status, asylum seekers are forbidden to settle in Istanbul. Migrants try to avoid the first obstacle once again through a camouflage, a sort of 'camouflage within the camouflage': since some nationalities cannot be deported – i.e. Afghans, Palestinians, Burmese and Somali – all Asians usually claim to be Burmese when applying for asylum; apprehended Iraqis and Iranians declare they are Palestinian, Africans that they are Somali. However, Turkish police are often reported to use strong-arm tactics to establish the real national identity of intercepted irregular migrants (AAVV, 2008). The prohibition of living in Istanbul is imposed by the 'Law on the Sojourn and Travel of Foreigners in Turkey' which states that refugees can only

reside in locations permitted by the Ministry of Interior, the so-called 'satellite cities', located in the lesser developed Central and Eastern Anatolian regions of Turkey (Içduygu and Biehl, 2011). Although the Law dates back to 1950, it is only since the end of 2005, when the EU started concrete accession negotiations with Turkey, that asylum seekers are forcibly restricted to living in one of these isolated and far away 'satellite cities'. These places offer very limited opportunities to ensure a minimum decent subsistence, so many migrants opt for a life of 'illegality' and clandestinity in Istanbul (Biehl, 2011). This again shows how externalization policies to curb transit migration might have concrete effects at the local level and negative impacts on migrants, be they really in transit or not (as is the case for true asylum seekers).

The dynamism as well as the ethnic and cultural mixture of Istanbul, enhanced by the large number of tourists visiting it every day of the year, can indeed provide a sense of anonymity and relative protection to irregular migrants. However, contrary to what happens in Tijuana, incorporation within the local society is all but smooth for them. Their racial, linguistic and religious background is quite different from that of Turkish people and very few opportunities exist for them to interact with locals and create cross-cultural relationships with them. Xenophobia, racism and fear spread among natives, especially the low-income population, who perceive poor foreigners settling in the city as undesirable competitors for scarce resources (Marconi, 2009). Prejudice against those that are depicted and perceived as 'illegal' and 'criminals', hence potentially dangerous, drive the middle-class to avoid any contact with them.

As a consequence, migrants tend to cluster in run-down neighbourhoods in central districts where other marginal groups are also confined, contributing to the existing spatial and social fragmentation of the urban space. For instance, up to 2000 Africans are estimated to live in Kumkapi, a neighbourhood within the historical peninsula mainly inhabited by Kurds, which themselves constitute a highly excluded minority (Marconi, 2009). Many other Africans, mainly from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Togo are settled in Tarlabaşı and Kurtuluş, two neighbourhoods within the central Beyoğlu district, where Iraqi Arab refugees also cluster besides Kurds, gypsies as well as transsexuals and transvestites who are absolutely unaccepted and persecuted in other parts of the city.

These neighbourhoods are strategic places not just for finding anonymous accommodation, but also for the bulk of opportunities they offer to get in contact with providers of employment in the widespread informal market, as well as with the smuggling networks. Due to their undocumented status and lack of knowledge of the Turkish language, it is hard for newcomers to get a proper job even in the large metropolis. Most of them just find sporadic occupation in the construction or textile sectors, usually paid well below the minimum wage. In many cases middlemen stop up to 20 per cent out of their poor wages, and it frequently happens that

unscrupulous employers do not pay them at all after a week of hard work. Hardly making enough money to pay for their daily necessities, their living conditions in these marginal neighbourhoods are quite precarious. The building stock of these densely populated mazes of narrow streets, consisting of decaying Ottoman-era houses built on hillsides, is in a crubling state. Migrants are generally given the the basement or entrance level flats, which are very small, have very little ventilation and often lack heating, electricity and even plumbing. Private landlords informally rent them these miserable lodgings for exorbitant prices, far higher than what Turkish people would pay. In order to share costs, migrants end up living in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions. A two room flat is usually rented for no less than 300 Euros per month, and is typically shared by 8 to 10 people. Most Turks consider neighbourhoods such as Tarlabaşı no-go zones. Their reputation as dangerous places of drug dealing, crime and prostitution keeps 'respectable people', and even the police, out. On the other hand, for its inhabitants it is the semblance of marginality, irregularity and sometimes illegality that provides a sort of protection and security. At Tarlabaşı's busy Sunday market where food is sold at 20% of the price in surrounding areas, Turkish is not spoken at all. It's either Kurdish or Arabic, the same languages as many of the hand-written signs of the small shops, groceries and internet cafés in the neighbourhood (Watson, 2007). Here, migrants don't need to be invisible or pretend to be someone else. Despite its location at less than a mile from Istanbul's five-star hotels, just beside the commercial and cultural heart of the city, Tarlabaşı is a sort of marginal city within the city, inhabited by a diverse population made up of subgroups sharing the same space but far from merging into a community.

The Tarlabaşı experienced by stranded migrants is an example of individualization of relationships and dissolution of traditional forms of association. Urban fragmentation here reaches the point that social interactions are often more virtual than physical for them. A part from a very limited number of acquaintances, often from the same country of origin, the relations migrants are able to establish with the urban society outside their neighbourhood, or even with the same marginal people they meet every day crossing the street or bump into at the Sunday market, are weaker than the connections they have with relatives at home or friends in Europe. Hardly able to make enough money in this city to pay for their daily necessities, many migrants continue to rely on relatively regular or *forfait* sums that family and friends in Europe, or relatives at home, send them through money transfer agencies. While stranded in Istanbul, the translocal connections these migrants keep with their places of origin and those where they plan to go, dilate their territory of action in a cross-border space linking punctual nodes. The impossibility of being formally included[13] prevents the development of any sense of belonging to the host urban community and deters them from pursuing any form of real integration. Informal incorporation into

the local society is used to assure mere survival, while interactions that occur by maintaining multiple local ties in different countries appear a fundamental feature of the migrant's life.

These spatial practices cast a question mark upon the bond between identity and citizenship, individual and place, neighborhood and belonging (Bauman, 2008). The same questions apply to the effectiveness of shaping migration policies on the container model of a territorially determined society. Migration is prompting newly-emerging spatial dimensions. Maybe the reconstruction of social cohesion in increasingly diverse urban societies depends on the capacity to connect global networks with local existence.

The fundamental role of the Civil society
Local governments in both cities do not take any pro-active initiatives to cope with the needs of migrant residents. Their presence remains invisible in official censuses and discourses and, as a consequence, it is simply not taken into consideration in local politics and practices. In the case of Turkey, it has to be noticed that its strong and centralized state tradition heavily limits local authorities' freedom of action on an issue like international migration, considered as a matter of 'control' and 'national security'. Decision making power in the migration field is centralized in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior. This deters (and somehow absolves) local authorities from taking on the responsibility of providing public services to non-citizens, irregular stayers in particular (Biehl, 2011). However in Mexican cities, where the decentralization and devolution processes not only allow but compel municipal authorities to take action on urban issues, the awareness of local governments about the presence of foreign residents and their involvement in addressing their needs is also nearly inexistent.

The outcomes on the ground are hence not very different. When international migrants are able to access basic public services, such as healthcare or education, it is usually due to the absence of specific prohibitions rather than intentionally granted rights. For undocumented migrants, access to public services is usually highly dependent on the goodwill and humanitarian attitudes of individual public officials. In Istanbul for example, the fear of arrest, but also the cost of treatment and communication problems with Turkish medical staff, are among the main factors keeping these migrants away from public health facilities. However, providing assistance to migrants or refugees has become more difficult even for the most wellintentioned public workers, since with recent legislative changes all access to public services is computerized, requiring an official identity number that migrants are not entitled to hold (Biehl, 2011).

Also in the case of specific pro-poor initiatives promoted by local governments, usually there is no open discrimination against foreigners. However, simply because they have not been taken into account as a

14. The *Casa del Migrante* (migrant house) run by the Scalabrinians, a Roman Catholic religious order since 1987, receives migrant men and can host up to 180 people; the *Instituto Madre Asunta* for women and children, FOUNDED IN 1994, which is also run by the Scalabrinians and provided with 45 beds; the *casa YMCA de Menores Migrantes* (YMCA house for unaccompanied minors), 24 beds; the *Albergue para migrantes zona Norte* (migrant hostel of the northern zone) of the civil association ARAC, for men, which has 40 beds but usually hosts 70 people; the *Casa Refugio Elvira* run by 'Hermandad Mexicana transnational partnership' which is the only one hosting families but only up to a maximum of 3 cores; the dormitory for men of the Salvation Army, with place for 100 people.

15. Mexicali is the second largest city in Baja California, also located on the border with the US. The civil society organizations participating in the *Coalición* are the Scalabrinian *casa del migrante*, the *instituto Madre Asunta* and *casa YMCA* in Tijuana; in Mexicali the *Albergue del Desierto* (Shelter of the Desert) providing assistance to unaccompanied minors, the *Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador Migrante* (center for the support of migrant workers) and the *Centro de Derechos Humanos y Educacion Civica* (center for human rights and civic-education).

16. For instance, from 2005 to 2008 the French NGO Medicins du Monde (MdM, Doctors of the World) ran a project promoting migrants' right to health. They provided medical assistance to migrants hosted in hostels in both Tijuana and Mexicali (the two border cities in Baja California State), as well as in a health centre placed in San Ysidro international crossing point, where more than 200,000 irregular migrants are deported from the US each year. From May 2006 to May 2007 MdM assisted 1,164 migrants, 17% of them foreigners.

specific group of the target population, they inevitably end up excluded from assistance. Once again, lack of documents is among the main obstacles preventing their access to existing social welfare services. In order to be included in programs targeting Istanbul's vulnerable groups, migrants would be required to produce a residence permit that, as mentioned, most migrants are not able to get. In Tijuana the situation seems to be slightly more favourable, with the public sector de facto supporting migrants both directly and indirectly. In fact while the city's welfare schemes assist the more deprived segments of the population regardless of whether national or foreign, the Federal and State governments regularly provide financial support to immigrant-oriented NGOs (Alegria, 2005). These apparently positive circumstances are however the product of a discretionary *laissez-faire* attitude that is far from guaranteeing to migrants an equal and constant access to public services on the basis of the respect of their fundamental human rights.

In both Tijuana and Istanbul, the role of civil society organizations is of utmost importance in compensating for the very absence of public support to migrants and, to different extents, in advocating for their rights and raising awareness on migration-related issues. While in the Mexican border city most initiatives and structures address the needs of migrants in transit, mainly Mexicans but increasingly also foreigners, refugees are the 'official' target population of most charities and humanitarian organizations dealing with international migrants in the Turkish metropolis.

For decades Tijuana has been among the most popular points of transit for Mexican migrants heading towards the United States. As mentioned, increasing numbers of non-Mexicans are following the same route. Migrant-oriented NGOs have a long tradition in this city of providing assistance and aid to both those arriving with the intention of crossing to the other side and those forcibly returned to Mexico by the US authorities. Temporary shelter, orientation and medical assistance are the main services they offer to all migrants referred to them, regardless of their nationality or legal status.

In Tijuana there are six hostels for migrants, the principal ones run by Catholic organizations.[14] These structures, all placed close to the border, offer free accommodation usually for up to 15 days, but exceptions are often made. On average, 15 to 20 per cent of migrants they receive are of foreign origin. Many stay for just few days, many others return after failing to reach the other side. Such a service is very important because it offers a protected space, even if only for a limited time, that allows migrants to gain at least some experience of this 'difficult and dangerous' city, to look for a temporary employment, to meet other migrants with whom to share housing if they end up staying more than expected, as is often the case. Since 1996 some of the main organizations working with migrants in Tijuana and Mexicali,[15] have established the network *Coalición pro defensa del migrante* (Coalition for migrants' protection), which is both engaged in

coordinating the efforts for providing basic support to migrants and advocating for their rights. At the San Ysidro crossing point the *Coalición* runs the 'modulo de atención a migrantes' (attendance unit for migrants) where deported migrants are received upon their arrival, offered assistance and advice, provided with food and drinks, first aid, access to phone services and transportation to temporary shelters. Besides, the Coalición often collaborates with international NGOs to implement projects addressing migrants' needs.[16]

As far as migrants human rights' monitoring and protection are concerned, the organizations affiliated to the *Coalición* are very active in organizing and participating in conferences on the issue, as well as in promoting public events to raise awareness about the difficult conditions of migrants in transit. The most visible (and provocative) actions implemented each year in Tijuana are the 'posada sin fronteras' (posada[17] without borders) and the 'via crucis del Migrante' (Way of the Cross of the Migrant). These initiatives, highly visible for being performed in collective urban spaces, are used to publicly denounce the dramatic effects of the security-based migration policies.

The first event, which has been running for 17 years, is organized in the place where Tijuana's beach ends and San Diego's one begins, separated by the 'wall' that in that area consist in a relatively transparent steel-matted fence stretching out into the Pacific ocean. A few hundred people gather on both sides of the fence to overcome (and criticize) through testimonials, symbols and gestures[18] that artificial division of space and people.

During the holy Friday procession, migrants hosted at the Scalabrinian house for migrants carry along the main streets of Tijuana white crosses marked with the name, age, and place of origin of those who died during the crossing over the previous 12 months. The procession ends up in front of the wall, where the new crosses are hung besides those of the previous years, making up an impressive endless line. This background scenery, a looming visual and silent protest against the side effects of excessive control measures, can be glimpsed from many parts of the city and is the first thing one sees when leaving Tijuana airport.

Besides the activities carried out by civil society organizations, a special mention has to be made of 'Grupo Beta' (Beta Group), a good practice that originated in Tijuana and was then replicated in several other Mexican cities. It is an initiative as innovative - for its potential to protect the human rights of migrants - as contradictory for the institutional framework within which it is implemented. Established in 1990 as a branch of the National Institute for Migration (INM), the Grupo Beta is a *sui generis* police force having the explicit objective of 'protecting and defending migrants human rights, as well as their personal and patrimonial security, regardless of their nationality and their legal status (documented or undocumented)'.[19] The contradiction lies in the fact that the establishment of this group is legitimated by the articles 137 and 138

17. The 'posada' is a popular celebration in Mexico and Central America commemorating the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem . It usually represents them going from place to place looking for shelter and being rejected until they find somebody to welcome them. The celebration continues there with food and drink, singing and dancing.

18. For example they sing songs together, listen to speakers from both sides of the border, read aloud the names of those who died during the crossing, share food, exchange gifts and even play volleyball across the fence

19. Aims and activities of Grupo Beta are widely described at this link www.inm.gob.mx/index.php/page/Grupo_Beta

of that same General Population Act that, in other parts, imposes severe sanctions against Mexicans assisting undocumented migrants with obligation to inform INM about their presence.

Nevertheless, the stated mission of INM's Grupo Beta is to *'assist, rescue and orient'* migrants along the border and while in Mexican territory, without the power to stop or apprehend them. Instead, they have the obligation to report any abuse against migrants, in particular if committed by Mexican authorities, as well as to intercept human smugglers. The prohibition from arresting migrants is rather logical, otherwise their target population would eschew the Beta agents as it does with all other police forces. And the strategy has proved to be an effective one: this institution is today very familiar to migrants in transit, who largely show they trust it. Highly visible (and recognizable) for their brightly orange trucks and uniforms, Beta agents are known for providing food and water while advising at the same time not to try the crossing and informing about the dangers migrants might encounter along their way, from the harsh temperature of the desert, to the dangerous waters of rivers to the 'Minutemen', a civilian armed border patrol group zealously engaged in keeping 'illegal aliens' out their territory.

The case of 'Grupo Beta' is a good example of how a local initiative addressing human rights protection might de facto overcome other national political priorities (i.e. immigration control). Although the cited legislative contradiction is still present, this practice has not only been running for twenty years but is also formally institutionalized and being replicated in many other cities.[20] In total, from 2002 to 2009 the Grupos Beta rescued nearly 37,000 migrants from danger along the borders and provided with orientation and advice more than 3,5 million migrants.[21]

If in Tijuana social activism in favor of migrants' human rights is deeply rooted and often effective, the situation in Istanbul is considerably different. As mentioned, in this city civil society organizations mainly address refugees. This specific focus appears however to be a sort of 'conventional front' many NGOs are somehow forced to take: they indeed provide support to a wide range of migrants – including, of course, refugees and asylum seekers but also transit and economic migrants, usually undocumented - but they cannot openly admit it. Be it because of intentional political strategy or true lack of awareness, immigration appears to be such an 'inexistent' issue' in Istanbul that not only are migrants compelled towards 'invisibilisation', but the same happens to the organizations striving to assist them.

Since the government prefers to avoid interference from outsiders in domestic affairs, even the local offices of international organizations such as IOM and UNHCR have restricted autonomy,[22] let alone NGOs. For instance, Caritas is able to run its office and activities only because it is officially registered as the Embassy of the Vatican in Istanbul. The Istanbul Interparish Migrant Program (IIMP) - which gathers seven charity

organizations linked to Catholic, Protestant and evangelical churches - despite being tolerated in its 'mission', is not legally recognised and has hence very limited freedom of action. It cannot fundraise nor campaign to increase awareness on migration-related issues. Migrants looking for their services are made aware of its existence only by word-of-mouth.

The reason why local authorities turn a blind eye to the activities implemented by these organizations is that they provide essential services for which the government does not mean to take responsibility. However, under these conditions it is evidently impossible for civil society organizations to compensate for the absence of governmental support to migrants and asylum seekers.

Nevertheless, they prove to be the most active stakeholders on the ground and are vital to the survival of many migrants. IIMP offers them help in terms of health assistance, material resources (food, clothes, nappies), information and legal aid. Its headquarters, placed in the central Istiklal avenue, are open three days a week. Foreign doctors volunteer there for outpatient visits. Those in need of treatment are sent to Saint George Hospital, run by the Austrian Religious Order which partners IIMP. Soup kitchen service is offered twice a week either at IIMP headquarters or at the Greek Orthodox Church in Taksim Square. Since 1995 IIMP runs 'the Monday Moms and Tots Program' for migrant women who are either pregnant or with young children. Besides representing an important opportunity for socialization, the program provides health advice, education and referral as well as hot meal plus milk and fruit to take away. When feasible, IIMP also promotes 'Adult Education Scholarship Programmes' in collaboration with the Turkish American University Association and other private schools, providing computer or language (Turkish and English) courses. Despite all the efforts made, due to legal, financial and visibility obstacles only a small proportion of migrants in need is able to access the services offered.[23]

While IIMP provides support to migrants from a wide range of countries,[24] Caritas focuses on Iraqis, in particular by assisting the 300 families settled in Tarlabasi and Kurtulush neighbourhoods. Visits are periodically made to their houses to assess their living conditions and direct the small funds available to those most in need. Shopping coupons are distributed to them and sometimes help is provided to pay rent. Caritas also organizes a Social Activity Programme for migrant women and vocational training courses for teenagers. It also supports the Salesian Educational Programme, a school attended by up to 300 Iraqi students. This is the only facility granting children of Iraqi migrants access to education. But it is not recognized by Turkish authorities, making it impossible for them to prove their educational achievements. Besides, conflicts have arisen with neighbours complaining about the noise made by children during the breaks. Despite not making more noise than other students in other schools, it is significant to note that this 'school for Iraqis' is less tolerated.

As far as secular NGOs are concerned, the Helsinki Citizen Assembly (HCA) has to be highlighted as the most active in raising awareness and advocating migrants' rights, but in this case the focus, restricted to asylum seekers and refugees, is unavoidable. However it is interesting to note the efforts made in understanding and evaluating as broad a picture as possible on international migration in the city. Every two months a meeting is held at HCA convening representatives of all migrant-oriented organizations working in the city, including IIMP, Caritas, IOM, UNCHR, ORAM and any other stakeholders who might be interested in participating. During these meetings the main emerging issues and problems faced by migrants are discussed, possible joint action are explored, coordination plans are made to allocate the few human and financial resources available.

On the other hand the level of involvement of Turkish NGOs remains low and the aid they offer to migrants in Istanbul is marginal (Perouse, 2004).

Ways ahead

The political rationalities underpinning the discourse on transit migration definitively place the issue in the domain of national security and migration control, structuring and shaping the field of possible actions and, in some way, of scientific research. The transit paradigm is used by the EU and US as a mechanism for legitimizing extra-territorial control of 'irregular' migration flows. It creates in fact a discursive field in which exercising pressures on 'transit countries' to act as buffer zones is 'rational'. This way of framing the problem leaves out of focus the effects of immigration, both temporary and permanent, in cities of these so called transit countries, preventing the development of adequate institutional structures and local sensemaking processes to cope with it.

Parallel to the political attention towards it, academic interest in transit migration is growing too, including criticism of the politicization of the issue by both western countries and the so called transit countries. There is growing evidence that transit countries are also countries of immigration. Besides Turkey and Mexico, highlighted in this paper, the most explored cases are Morocco, where more and more Sub-Saharan Africans are settling, and Ukraine, which is hosting increasing numbers of Chechens and Moldavians but also Indians, Chinese and Pakistanis. Research on transit migration has been carried out also in other countries of the Maghreb and in Middle East countries on the Mediterranean.[25]

However most literature is limited to the country level and very little research exists on cities affected by transit flows. The current academic and political discourse on transit migration largely focuses on the implications for, and responsibilities of, 'transit countries' or on the irregular situation of 'transit migrants', but very little reference is made to the physical nodes of transit routes where migrants stop over and often get stranded, i.e. urban areas.

A more pragmatic approach would be needed by recognizing that, whether because they mean to settle there or are forced to stay by circumstances, increasing numbers of migrants live in cities of transit countries in very vulnerable conditions. In order to raise international and national awareness about this issue as well as to push local authorities to make informed choices, there is a need for information and data on i) who is there, for how long, in what conditions, doing what and ii) what challenges the presence of these migrants poses to urban governance, who (if anybody) is responding to the needs of this invisible population, how the local residents are reacting, and so on.

Quantitave research would be a priority since official surveys, censuses and registration instruments fail to register the target population itself, largely made up of irregular immigrants. In most cases, not even a broad estimate of the number of foreign residents is possible with existing data. Qualitative research, as was the case for Tijuana and Istanbul, would however provide useful insights on the emerging urban issues, the existing inclusive initiatives and innovative practices. All this may, in turn, foster broader evidence-based decision-making and lead to the promotion of more coherent migration policies, locally, nationally and internationally.

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