

# Envisioning a Global Order of Migration: The UN Compacts

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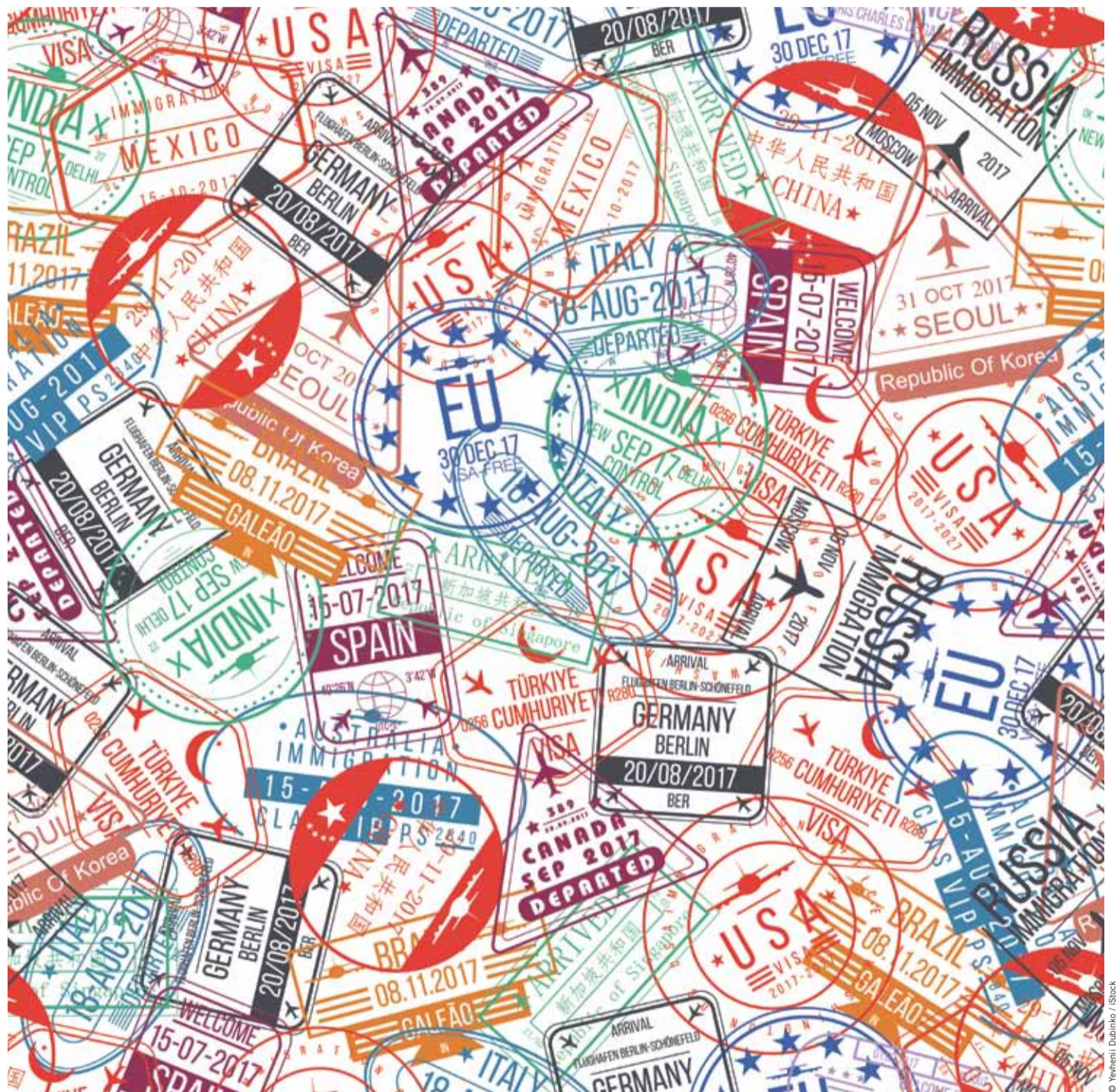
*Two Global Compacts on migration recently released by the United Nations have become the focus of much attention and heated debate, particularly in European states with national populist governments. But why the silence concerning the precarity experienced by migrants and non-migrants alike?*

In 2018, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed two important documents which provide a comprehensive framework for coping with the challenges and dilemmas of migration: the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). These Compacts offer building blocks for an architecture of a global politics of migration by redefining what migration is and what it should be, while also providing a basis for the global governance of migrants and refugees. Given the pervasiveness of the idea that migration is on the increase and of a refugee “crisis” in political imaginaries in Europe and beyond, these documents have acquired an immediate significance in public and academic debates.

## Postwar Migration Flows

Amid today’s heated debates on refugee and migration “crises,” which are often dominated by images of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, it is important to remember that the “migration and refugee crisis” in postwar Europe actually followed the fall of the Iron Curtain and included the refugee flows stemming from the wars in Yugoslavia. This was an East-West migration within Europe. The dramatic increase in migration was to a large extent fueled by capital flows and market deregulation after the collapse of the Communist States. And it was this “crisis” that in fact prompted the search for new global governance mechanisms in Europe to limit and regulate migration. Several international organizations were then established and so it is not a coincidence that the IOM became a permanent organization in 1989. According to Guy Abel, it was during the period between 1990 and 1995 that global migration flows reached a historic peak. This period began with the fall of the Iron Curtain, included the outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan, and concluded with the Rwandan genocide.<sup>1</sup> The people seeking new lives in the West were from former socialist countries, which is to say, they came from those countries now displaying the highest resistance to migrants and refugees in Europe.

In today’s political context, where issues surrounding migration have become so central and gained such urgency, one would expect international organizations to have long



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since been involved in migration matters. Yet these organizations have only shown an interest in migration and its governance relatively recently. In fact, migration was not on the agendas of many international organizations before the 1990s. As Kathleen Newland rightly points out, “attention to international migration in the 1990s was sporadic [...] No UN agency had migrants or migration processes as priorities [...] All of this changed quite sudden-

ly around the turn of the millennium. Suddenly migration was everywhere one looked in the UN system and beyond.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, most of the international organizations that have intervened in today’s migration debates and policy initiatives were established in the post-Cold War period of the 2000s. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, launched its annual Dialogue on Migration as recently as 2001. The

Global Commission on International Migration was only established in 2003. This was the same year that the first Global Forum on Migration and Development took place. Moreover, the first UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development was in 2006, the same year that several international organizations came together to establish the Global Migration Group. It was only as recently as 2004 that migration was even the topic of the ILO’s In-

ternational Labor Conference and not until 2009 that human mobility was the subject of the UNDP’s Human Development Report.

It might be useful to question the demographic source data forming the basis of the endless declarations by the many UN agencies and international organizations about the number of migrants and refugees being at an “all-time high.” It is therefore worth remembering that global migration flows have remained consistently low since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Even if in absolute terms the numbers of migrants and refugees has increased, the proportion of the world population who are migrants has remained at about 3% for more than half a century. In fact, as Guy Abel and Nikola Sanders of the Wittgenstein Center



for Demography in Vienna illustrate, overall global migration flows actually declined during the period from 2010 to 2015.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, during that same period, migration into and across Europe also declined. Indeed, the largest global migration flows take place within individual regions rather than across continents and the majority of flows take place within the Global South. Moreover,

ious societies, and above all economies, become meaningful.

These Compacts then aim to shape agendas for the management and utilization of migration. In this respect, they are built upon a set of shared assumptions: for instance, that migration is universal (beyond regions and individual countries) and central to the functioning of globalizing economies. Thus the

accumulation of capital and related frictions. The recognition of such a connection would have enabled the Compacts to break their well-guarded silence about the effects of empires and colonial structures, along with their associated legacies, on the dynamics of current migration and refugee flows as well as statelessness.

Instead, the Compacts actually create silences about the broad-

would be to develop ways of focusing on experiences and constraints that are shared by people who tend to be conceptually differentiated by scholars and policy makers as either migrant/refugee or native. However, this would require modifying our analytical lens so as to move beyond a reified migrant/native divide that has been presented as absolute. By making this effort, we could make visible not only common conditions of precarity and displacement, but also their shared claims for social justice. This might enable us to start seeing the ways in which the recent migration crisis is *made* to be a turning point in the political dynamics of the European project. ◀

- 1) Guido Mingles, "Global Migration? Actually, the World is Staying at Home," *Spiegel Online*, May 17, 2016.
- 2) Kathleen Newland, "The Governance of International Migration: Mechanisms, Processes, and Institutions," *Global Governance* 16, no. 3 (2010): 331–334; here 331–332.
- 3) One reason for discrepancies among the conclusions drawn about migration flows is the nature of demographic source data used in calculating the relevant figures.
- 4) Mingles, "Global Migration?" However these migration flow figures only cover the period until July 2015.
- 5) Declan Butler, "Refugees in Focus," *Nature*, March 2, 2017.
- 6) Though the two Compacts differ in several respects, they can be considered together in terms of their overall architecture and architectural style.

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UNHCR estimates show that there were 21.3 million refugees in 2015, as compared with 20.6 million in 1992—when the global population was around two-thirds of today's.<sup>5</sup>

We already know from Arjun Appadurai's seminal work, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, that declining migration figures would not be enough to quell growing anxieties towards minorities. However, it is important to note the contrast between the over-politicization of migration numbers and their actual dynamics.

#### Defining migration at a global level

For all the intense discussion of the Global Compacts on migration, neither Compact is legally binding. No matter how many states endorse them, no state is obliged to implement them. Neither does the GCR afford much real protection to refugees, since 85% of refugees worldwide live in the Global South and more than half of these are either internally displaced (refugees in their own country) or stateless. They therefore fall outside of the Geneva Convention's narrow definition of refugees and are not entitled to protection under the GCR. What do the Compacts actually do then?

The significance of the Compacts lies in their power to establish a specific understanding of migration at a global level. They help to establish the cognitive structures for making migration legible within an envisioned global order. The cognitive structure and semantics of the Compacts provide a scripted space in which to define migra-

logic of the Compacts suggest that it is a necessity for states to cooperate on migration governance in a manner which would be compatible with the protection of state sovereignty. This means striking a balance between the costs and benefits of migration in particular, since migrants are seen as a resource to each state and therefore the costs of migration can be reduced by the sharing of responsibilities among states. However, the stakeholders that play a role in the new management of migration are not only states but also, international and regional organizations, civil society actors and international financial institutions, as well as other private sector actors. The sharing of responsibility among these stakeholders and the resulting partnerships is central to the grammar of global migration governance as set out in the Compact. Yet issues of balancing responsibility with accountability, as well as unequal power relations among actors, remain inadequately addressed.

#### Neoliberal dynamics and geometries of power

On the issue of responsibility, the Compacts often imply that it is to be devolved to the local level and to migrants and refugees themselves. The contrast between the scales of power and responsibility in the Compacts is striking. Migrants/refugees are hailed as market-oriented economic actors, and entrepreneurship and self-reliance are prominent themes. The utilitarian framework of the Compacts recognises that different fields are related to one another, such as migrant and refugee protection, secu-

er dynamics of political economy and the geometries of power involved in the generation of wealth and in the dispossession that underpins common conditions of precarity for migrants and non-migrants alike. These connections and disconnections, together with the resulting silences and blind spots, point to the style of the Compacts' architecture, which reflects the historical period and the specific site of their construction. For these Compacts were not produced in a void but in a world where neoliberal transformations, ideas and policies intersect with postcolonial politics in ordering the planet. The political nature of the Compacts lies in these silences and disconnections, which ironically instantiate a depoliticized understanding of migration.

The Compacts do to some extent recognize the mixed nature of migratory flows. They also acknowledge that efforts to differentiate migrants and refugees into endless categories are futile. However, these Compacts still make assumptions about migrants and refugees on the one hand and "natives" on the other, as if these categories were economically and politically poles apart. This creates impediments to seeing the commonalities of these groups of people. Today's world is deeply marked by the erosion of both livelihoods and welfare systems, as well as increasing inequality and precarity. These are the forces that not only create migrations, but also dispossess, displace and shape the precarity of people who choose to remain where they are. Yet narratives persist about how migrants and refugees pose a threat to the economic, de-

tion, migrants, and refugees, as well as possible solutions to the challenges that these people face and pose.<sup>6</sup> The Compacts therefore play a role in establishing a canon of texts about migration and scaling them within a distinctive global narrative. Here, the Compacts' architecture is determined by the way they connect different fields, actors, institutions, technologies and discourses, such that the mobility, agency and location of migrants and refugees in var-

ity and safety, and sustained development. While making connections between these fields, the Compacts disconnect others. The emphasis on the self-reliance and self-responsibility of migrants and refugees reflects the basic values and dynamics of a neoliberal order that these Compacts take for granted. Thus while migrants and refugees are conceived of as economic actors, they are not considered labouring subjects who are connected to the dynamics of the

demographic, biological and cultural security of citizens. Thus the framing of refugees/migrants as economic and social subjects who are supposedly categorically distinct from those who define themselves as "natives" obscures the location of migrants and refugees in societies and fuels the rise of anti-migrant, anti-refugee populism.

One way to go beyond such paralyzing divides, which are also perpetuated in and by the Compacts,

## Ayşe Çağlar Becomes a New Permanent Fellow



Photo: Klaus Ränger

The IWM is pleased to announce that Ayşe Çağlar, Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Deputy Head of Department at the University of Vienna, joined the IWM as Permanent Fellow in October 2018.

Ayşe Çağlar received her PhD at McGill University, Department of Anthropology and Habilitation in Sociology and Social Anthropology at Free University, Berlin. Before joining University of Vienna she was a professor and the chair of Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University, Budapest and a Minerva Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Goettingen. She has held visiting professorships at several universities including Stockholm University, IHS Vienna, Central European University, Budapest, Donauuniversität Krems, and Ethnologisches Seminar Zürich. Furthermore, she is a member of Academia Europaea and the Science Academy Society of Turkey. Çağlar has widely

published on processes of migration, urban restructuring, transnationalization and the state, and of dispossession and displacement. Her research focus at the IWM addresses the location of migrants in city-making processes especially in disempowered cities (see below). Among her most recent publications are: *Migrants and City Making: Dispossession, Displacement, and Urban Regeneration* (co-authored with Nina Glick Schiller; Duke University Press, 2018) and *Locating Migration: Rescaling Cities and Migrants* (co-edited by Nina Glick Schiller; Cornell University Press, 2018).

On March 28, she organized a workshop at the IWM entitled "The Global Compacts on Refugees and Migrants and the Architecture of Global Politics of Migration." It explored the semantics, blind spots, as well as the political and social implications of these Compacts in dealing with the complex reality of global migration. The panel discussion in the evening, moderated by Luiza Bialasiewicz (Professor of European Governance, University of Amsterdam; IWM Visiting Fellow), addressed questions of responsibility and protection in the global politics of migration. The panelists included: Marian Benbow (Head of the IOM Country Office for Austria), Christoph Pinter (Head of UNHCR Austria), Ruth Wodak (emer. Distinguished Professor, Lancaster University; IWM Visiting Fellow) and Ayşe Çağlar. Video: [www.youtube.com/IWMVienna](https://www.youtube.com/IWMVienna)

## Migrants in City-Making and Urban Politics

How are migrants involved in making and re-making cities? Historically, how have they become part of the generation of wealth in cities and of the social fabric and politics of cities? How do migrants contribute to and challenge the sites and scales of participation and citizenship, of social justice claims and narratives, and of the politics of cities?

Concentrating on the contested location of migrants in the making and remaking of cities, this research focus addresses the dynamics and narratives of social and political inclusion and exclusion in cities. It explores the political alliances among city residents beyond historically and culturally established divides in imagining and fighting for urban futures. The aim is to examine the challenges that migrants pose to urban governance and to the struggle for social and historical justice in city-making processes. There is a particular focus on the displacements, dispossessions and contentious politics involved

in the making and remaking of cities that were formerly industrial hubs and which are acquiring increasing prominence in debates on urban redevelopment and politics. These rustbelt cities have also become central to discussions about the increasing levels of populism in today's political climate. There will be studies of migrants in the cities of global powerhouses. However, the centerpiece of this research focus concerns those cities that migrants have helped to establish as industrial hubs but that have since been neglected and now often struggle with demographic anxieties. We study discursive and institutional continuities and discontinuities in histories and ethnographies of city-making as well as migrant emplacement in these cities. This involves comparative research on deindustrialized cities where "culture" and cultural industries have taken center stage in efforts to reinvent these places and their populations.