Guest editorial

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Special issue on Migration in modern age: agency, ICT, and the digitalization of policy responses

Migration has re-emerged as one of the most important topics in contemporary political and academic debates. There is a growing recognition that active involvement of all stakeholders is needed if migration-inflicted short- and long-term implications are to be effectively addressed. Interestingly, the advent of sophisticated information and communication technology (ICT) creates several opportunities to deal with those implications in a more systematic, more targeted and, indeed, a more efficient manner than ever before. The objective of this special issue is to encourage interdisciplinary research and debate on the multifaceted intersection of migration and ICT as it unfolds at macro-, mezzo- and micro-levels. Against this backdrop, the special issue had also sought to reflect on how these issues and processes fuel the process of transforming policy rendering its digital aspects more pronounced than ever.

Research on migration flourishes (Samy and Duncan, 2021; Hassan *et al.*, 2019; Galantino, 2020). The 2015–2016 refugee and migration crises that Europe was exposed to resonated in the international media, fuelling not only popular interest in migration but also the instrumentalization of migration (Visvizi, 2018; Brand, 2010). However, several other refugee and migration crises are currently unfolding today. Consider Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and, for instance, Myanmar and the Rohingya people. The estimated number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. Estimates suggest that in 2019, 272 million people lived in a country other than of their birth. This is over three times more than the estimated number in 1970 (IOM, 2019). The twin refugee and migration crises that hit Europe might have been decisive though, in light of pushing the debate on irregular migration away from demographics and geography towards broadly conceived social sciences (Duncan, 2020; Davis and Deole, 2021; Kent, 2021). As a result, migration research has turned into one of the most vibrant fields of research today.

Several issues and topics require greater attention of the research community, if modern age migration is to be understood comprehensively (Visvizi *et al.*, 2019). These issues include, among others: the question of individual migrant/refugee agency, especially as when confronted with the rather generic terms of "migration" and "migration flows;" the agency–structure relationship, especially as it unfolds in the act of migration *per se*; and the agency-structure relation as it unfolds in the process of managing migration. From a different angle, too little in the current debate on migration has been said about the mezzo-level implications of migration, e.g. as seen and experienced at the local, community or city levels.

What brings these seemingly diverse considerations together is ICT and the ICT-driven capacity to govern effectively in an increasingly digital era. Examined carefully, ICT plays a mediating role in the processes of digitalization, regulation and governance at local, regional, national and international levels. Accordingly, by bringing ICT into the discussion on migration, new frontiers of research can be identified, new research questions can be posed, and – certainly – new insights into the multi-scalar issue of migration and its expanded impact

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on digital policy, regulation and governance can emerge. This special issue was devoted to these aspects of migration.

Several papers were submitted to the special issue. Following an arduous double-blind peer process, five papers are included in this issue. Specifically, Obi *et al.* (2021) in their paper titled "Digitalization and migration: the role of social media and migrant networks in migration decisions. An exploratory study in Nigeria" explore the role of social media in influencing people's intention to migrate. The authors argue that social media and migrant networks play a positive mediating role in the migration decision of individuals. This is because information is spread more easily, transaction costs are reduced and so migration is facilitated. The authors highlight, nevertheless, contingencies related to the access and the ability to use social media. In this sense, implicitly, the authors suggest that the impact of social media is uneven and disproportionate among diverse strata of the society. Perhaps, the most important finding that the authors stress is that social media and migrant networks are biased, that is, it is possible to argue that the information disseminated is incomplete. For instance, social media and migrant networks tend to favour information on opportunities abroad, at the expense of highlighting the risk of transit or the uncertain nature of opportunities at a certain destination abroad. Clearly, more accurate information about these issues would have had an impact on people's intention to migrate.

In the next paper, "Social computing applications as a resource for newly arrived refugees in Kronoberg, Sweden," García Alonso *et al.* (2021) focus on migrants' digital skills to query the efficiency of e-government services designed to integrate the newly arrived migrants in the fabric of the local society. To this end, the authors examine migrants' perceptions of the utility, usability and efficacy of social computing applications. It is argued that the successful design and implementation of digital solutions to boost the integration process is a function of people's preferences and skills when using digital devices. Interestingly, as the authors stress, frequently the newly arrived migrants have negative perceptions of online services, especially as regards the sharing personal information. The latter is related to the migrants' lack of confidence and mistrust of social computing applications.

Focussing once again on social media, e-government services and digital skills, the next paper included in the special issue, authored by Rosenberg (2021), examines the relationship between immigration status, gender and country of origin on the use of e-government in Israel. By locating the discussion in the framework of immigrants' "double" and "triple" disadvantages, the author examines diverse factors – such as gender, country of origin, number of years since the arrival to Israel – that influence the exclusion of immigrants and disadvantage in access and the ability to use e-government services. The results of the study suggest that immigrant women are disadvantaged in terms of e-government use regardless of their year of immigration. Yet, when the data are segmented by country of origin, a triple disadvantage affects only female immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This suggests that, in a vicious circle, disadvantages permeate both offline and online spheres of life.

In the following paper, Almohammad *et al.* (2021) examine the motives, barriers and integration of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs into Turkish society. Using tools specific to structural equation modelling (SEM), the authors provide evidence that a significant positive relationship exists between both individual and contextual motives for integration into Turkish society. It is also stressed that the individual and contextual barriers do not appear to affect integration. Specifically, the findings of the study demonstrate that intention of the refugees to engage in entrepreneurial activity and earn some money to improve their lives are the most important individual motivations. As a result, their chances of obtaining Turkish citizenship, improving their language skills and increasing integration with Turkish society improve.

The discussion in the special issues closes with a paper by Mouazen and Hernández-Lara (2021) who conduct a bibliometric analysis of research on migration and smart cities, a topic

that requires explicit insight (Visvizi *et al.*, 2017). By exploring the state of the art of the debate on the connection between migration and smarty cities, the authors contextualize the discussion in this special issue. Indeed, all papers included in this volume query diverse aspects of migration and integration in the fabric of the receiving society, most frequently in the city space. By focussing on the role of ICT, most profoundly brought to migrants in the form of social media and e-government services, the papers included in this special issue established a direct link between migration, integration and smart cities.

Overall, this special issue sought to draw and explore new frontiers of research on migration and its multi-scalar implications for digital policy, regulation and governance at diverse levels of policymaking around the world (Duszczyk *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, the papers included in this volume address cases specific to Nigeria, Israel, Turkey and Sweden. However, at the agential level, the specific cases, that is, the individuals and their intention to migrate, to engage in entrepreneurial activity and/or their ability and propensity to use e-government services, offer insights into stories of migrants from Syria, former Soviet Union, Nigeria and other. By placing migration and ICT at the center of the discussion, this issue offers empirical insights into the relationship between individual migrants, migration and the structures in which they are embedded. Here the role of the local authorities in facilitating migrants' integration into the receiving society was stressed. As forced migration remains one of the key challenges contemporary societies must deal with, this issue serves as a timely reminder that, if properly used, ICT has the potential to mitigate several challenges migration generates for the incoming and for the receiving populations. More research is needed to explore the regulatory frameworks necessary for efficient and ethically sensitive, for example, the use of data (van Veenstra *et al.*, 2020) implementation of ICT-enhanced tools and approaches in the field of irregular/forced migration management, both domestically and internationally.

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