Beyond Irregular Migration Governance: Zooming in on Migrants’ Agency

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The Case for a Different Take on Understanding Irregular Migration

The loss of over a thousand human lives in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean during April 2015 has once again drawn media and political attention to the challenges that the European Union faces in its efforts to govern irregular migration and asylum in the region. However, what still seems to be wanting is our (experts’ and policy makers’) understanding of what drives people to put their lives at risk in search of a better future. What are the motivations that are so strong and what is the information they have? How do they organise their journey and how do they respond to changing policy practices (e.g., more intensive enforcement at the border or a more expansive rescue operation at sea)? How much do they know about destination or transit countries and how accurate is their information? How much are they in control of their own destinies and how much do they accept contingency and risk?

This Special Issue of *European Journal of Migration and Law* (based on original empirical research conducted within the framework of the IRMA project, Governing Irregular Migration: States, Migrants and Intermediaries at the Age of Globalisation, funded by the Greek Secretariat for Research and Innovation, ARISTEIA programme, 2012–2015) focuses on precisely this type of research and policy questions, placing (irregular) migration as a complex social process at the centre of the study. Bruno Latour (1999: 1482) argues that it is not an
airplane or a pilot that flies: “Flying is a property of the whole association of entities that includes airports and planes, launch pads and ticket counters.” Similarly, migration is neither about migration policies nor about individuals alone but about the interaction between the two, as well as the variety of intermediary actors and factors that are involved in the process of moving. The nature of the process can best be captured through a focus on the migrant rather than on the policy objective or the policy means. Irregular migration is a complex process set in motion by the migrant through the resources they can mobilise, developed in interaction with intermediaries (such as smugglers, border guards, fellow nationals, natives at transit or destination), and involving different tactics and strategies of navigating or even manipulating migration and asylum policy options (including visa policies, border controls, asylum processing, but also prospects for regularisation or even eventually long-term settlement).

The approach adopted in this Special Issue is anthropocentric: it seeks to cast light on the governance of irregular migration starting not from the policies and the government actors, but rather zooming in on the migrant as the main agent in the migration process. It is our contention that such an anthropocentric perspective improves our actual understanding of how migration control and migration management policies affect irregular migration and thus indirectly leads to a better understanding of the governance of irregular migration and asylum.

2 Beyond Irregular Migration Governance: Focusing on the Migrant

The study of migration governance has typically focused on a critical examination of policy programs, discourses, enforcement practices, and technologies deployed. One of the reference books in the field — notably the volume edited by James Hollifield, Phil Martin and Pia Orrenius (now in its third edition) entitled Controlling Immigration — focuses on a “systematic comparative study of immigration policy in fifteen industrialised democracies and the European Union” (Hollifield et al., 2014: 3) by looking at the efficacy of control measures and the gap between goals and results of national immigration policy. Scholars and policymakers have examined migration management as a set of regulatory mechanisms that aim to control mobility (see also Cassarino 2010). Critical studies looking at the transnational governance of international migration (Betts 2011, Kunz et al. 2011) have also centred on the convergence or divergence of policies and on the role of international organisations or regional