Decentering the Study of Migration Governance in the Mediterranean

Federica Zardo & Sarah Wolff

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Federica Zardo [a] and Sarah Wolff [b]

aDanube University, Department of Migration and Globalisation, Krems and University of Vienna, Department of Political Science, Vienna; bQueen Mary University London, School of Politics and International Relations, London, UK

Introduction

To what extent can a decentred approach improve our understanding of migration governance? In the field of public policy, it 'highlights the diverse and contingent meanings that inform the actions of the individuals involved in all kinds of practices of rule' (Bevir 2016, 232). In this special issue we engage indeed not only with decentring the institutions and actors involved, but also the meanings produced, narratives constructed as well as the practices they entail. Applied to the context of international relations and political geography, decentring pays attention to actors´ perceptions and practices that shape the negotiation process (El Qadim 2018; İşleyen 2018b). It also normatively engages with deconstructing dominant assumptions in the study of world politics (Bilgin 2017). In their call for a paradigm shift in the study of the European Union (EU)'s international relations, Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis argue that decentring involves, first, unpacking "the social scientific categories, assumptions and paradigm that underpin Eurocentric truth claims" and then "engaging with the assumptions and worldviews that underpin others' accounts" (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 286).

According to an increasing number of scholars, however, research on migration in the Mediterranean has been very Eurocentric (El Qadim 2018; Vollmer, Sert,; İçduygu 2015). Despite the growing interest in non-European actors and non-European contexts, these are primarily conceived as targets of EU policies rather than agents and *loci* of governance processes. In particular, the literature has fallen short in shifting the focus out of European conceptualisations of migration and its governance, as if migration was primarily a European problem and not a "historical defining marker of the Mediterranean" (Wolff and Hadj-Abdou 2018, 383). The last decade witnessed a proliferation of critical voices challenging traditional paradigms in various disciplines: migration studies (Bartels 2018; El Qadim 2018; O'Reilly 2015), border studies (Bialasiewicz 2012; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2016; Parker and Vaughan-

Williams 2012), and security studies (Bilgin 2010; Vaughan-Williams and Vaughan-Williams 2014) as well as political geography (Collyer and King 2015; Hyndman 2012; İşleyen 2018a; Mountz 2015). Yet, these valuable contributions do not necessarily go beyond the critique of Eurocentrism of migration governance.

A decentring approach is particularly relevant to migration governance due to its normative and ethical implications. The vulnerability of the population involved makes the adoption of a decentred approach at the same time compelling and decisive for understanding the complexity of this political phenomenon. It means deconstructing and reconstructing research puzzles, assumptions, key concepts, and how migration in the Mediterranean has been conceived so far. What happens to accepted explanations of EU migration governance processes if the interaction between smuggled migrants and smugglers is assumed to be part of the governance process? Do alternative scripts of migration governance arise if one looks at practices of non-governmental organisations in charge of search and rescue operations? Which critical junctures emerge from research on migration governance if migration is conceived as rooted in the history of the Mediterranean, especially when the latter is narrated from a European perspective? How do we take into account a more diverse set of scholarship to understand migration beyond Europe?

Having been mostly developed in the field of EU foreign policy, this introduction and the articles in this special issue take the decentring agenda further and offer three main contributions in the area of migration. Theoretically, we argue that "others" should not only consider decision-makers from non-EU countries but also perspectives of those beyond the policy-making elite (Bilgin 2017). This involves uncovering the dynamics of migration from an everyday politics perspective and everyday resistance, and in particular, connecting established and marginalised perspectives (Freemantle and Landau 2020; Kutz and Wolff 2020; Léonard and Kaunert 2021; Panebianco 2020). These works are key to understanding how EU borderwork is contested and shaped by non-EU state actors such as in Mali (Cold-Ravnkilde 2021), or in Ethiopia (Ayalew Mengiste 2021), and how contestation is framed in response to EU information campaigns that 'bring the border deeply into the everyday space of local communities before migrants even attempt to cross it' (Savio Vammen 2021).

Methodologically, we show how methodological decentring is a key step towards advancing the research agenda on migration governance, insofar that it involves circumscribing our object and choosing the words to describe it as well as "engaging" (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013) with the "others" through sources and approaches that compensate asymmetric relations (Bilgin 2020; Freemantle and Landau 2020; Panebianco 2020). Empirically, we enrich the decentring agenda by including neglected variables affecting the governance of migration both within Europe and beyond, to avoid the risk of "devolving into an endorsement of other forms of centrism" (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 294).

Following this approach, urban peripheries in Northern Africa and "urban estuaries" along African migration routes are heterogeneous examples of neglected spaces (Freemantle and Landau 2020; Kutz and Wolff 2020). Datasets from small and local NGOs in charge of humanitarian assistance in Italy, security operations in Turkey, advance our understanding of bordering and de-bordering practices (Léonard and Kaunert 2021; Panebianco 2020). Time, migration, and security frames come to illustrate how coercion is co-produced by European and African elites (Freemantle and Landau 2020; Léonard and Kaunert 2021).

Our endeavour in this special issue is challenging, because "even as we turn our gaze to other parts of the world, our insights are informed or limited by Eurocentric concepts and categories" (Bilgin 2020). Yet we seek to advance the knowledge of migration governance and the complex interaction of geography and global politics it involves. Through different cases and disciplinary approaches, the contributions show how the debates on key analytical concepts (Hufty 2011) of migration governance can be challenged and expanded: migration as the issue or problem at stake, the actors involved (and their agency), the interactions (and their temporality), the spaces and places where interactions take place. In the special issue, interdisciplinarity and ethnography, contrapuntal reading, and the practice approach are instances of methodological decentring, urban and border transit areas serve as heterogeneous examples of spatial decentring while deconstructing otherness or security embodies different forms of conceptual decentring.

To situate our contribution in the decentring literature, the following section reviews the state of the art before making some propositions to move forward in the debate, based on the research articles that are part of our decentring project and the rich discussions that we had with the authors. We argue that this special issue, and future research in the field, can best advance the research agenda by revisiting, in particular, how we analyse actors and agency as well as policy processes through a spatial and temporal decentring. In our conclusion, we elaborate on the contribution that methodologies and a focus on frames can bring to the decentring agenda.

Migration Governance in the Mediterranean: taking Stock of the Decentring Debate

Since the mid-2000s, scholarly interest in decentred approaches to the study of international relations has grown significantly (Acharya and Buzan 2007; Bilgin 2010; Hobson and Sajed 2017). Calls for "provincializing Europe" and "the West" (Chakrabarty 2000) and focusing on "the Rest" have multiplied mainly along the lines of security studies (Bilgin 2010), migration and border studies (El Qadim 2018; O'Reilly 2015), or political geography (Mountz 2015). A significant part of those efforts trying to integrate neglected perspectives into the analysis of

global affairs has indeed considered the Mediterranean area and migration as, respectively, the geographic and sectoral focus of the research. On one hand, the prominent geostrategic position of the Mediterranean from an international relations perspective and the power shifts that historically occurred in the region, make it a suitable case for the decentring agenda. On the other, there is little doubt that migrations have represented for centuries a factor of continuity in the history of the Mediterranean (Wolff and Hadj-Abdou 2018), a source of tensions and a mirror of broader power reconfigurations.

Critical security studies have shown how EU policies towards the Mediterranean region constructed "the Euro-Mediterranean" as a subject of security (Bigo 2014; Bilgin 2017), contributing to its perception as a fracture line between the European Union and "the other". The reference to the end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11 as temporal junctures in the analysis of Euro-Mediterranean relations and security have in part explained the securitisation process (Vaughan-Williams and Vaughan-Williams 2014). Changing timeframes might however provide alternative explanations and re-design the way policies in the Mediterranean are being studied. This is only in part what many argue when pointing to the need to inquire into the others' conception of the international and security to apprehend border and migration management practices (Vollmer, Sert, and İçduygu 2015). By "others" one should not only consider decision-makers from non-EU countries but also perspectives "of those beyond the policy-making elite" (Bilgin 2017). These actors´ perceptions and practices are capable of shaping the negotiation process, as some have started demonstrating (İşleyen 2018b) as well as deconstructing assumptions in the study of world politics. Moving in particular from state-centrism or Euro-centrism involves a *polity* decentring and considering that other polities may matter such as tribes, religion, or ethnicities (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018, 341). This also involves a normative decentring where key concepts of the Westphalian system such as borders or secularism might not have the same 'value' in other parts of the world and other polities. Critical approaches to security and migration have also advanced the debate on humanitarianism, showing "how humanitarianism can be easily blended and become cooperative with the violent, exclusionary and militarised security notions and practices" (Bilgic 2010, 460). Similarly, Rutazibwa has outlined the violence of colonial amnesia and how they are inherently built in the aid and development policies of donors in Africa. She also suggests that there is a need to bring politics back into aid development and precisely to engage in not only a process of remembering but remembrance (Rutazibwa 2018).

A practice approach has been particularly useful for explaining the coexistence of security and humanitarian rationales (Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Perkowski 2016) and for making the claim that traditional approaches to migration research have not adequately acknowledged the complexity of contemporary migration. Indeed, an increasing number of scholars working

in critical migration studies contend that practices and structuration theory can help to investigate processes and contexts that make migration possible (Squire 2017; Triandafyllidou 2019) and go beyond the legal categories of states through which flows are often apprehended (de 2017). Many have also contributed to the decentring agenda on migration policies by paying attention to migrants' agency to explain practices of contestation and negotiation of borders and spaces. In doing so, they have assumed that migration is a social process (Ansems, Carrera, and Guild 2016; Squire 2017) involving wider struggles for political, economic, and juridical participation. These approaches have engaged with the values and ethics at play in the EU's external policy.

Critical geography has instead investigated the impact of this Eurocentric spatialisation of the Mediterranean (Mountz 2015). It has, therefore, engaged in a 'spatial decentring' of the EU politics of migration to overcome the 'territorial trap' that is induced by a Eurocentric conception of space (Agnew 1994). This endeavour requires engaging with the 'spatial and geographic features of other societies, polities, countries or regions' (Keuleers, Fonck, and Keukeleire 2016, 350). Borders are indeed irrelevant in many other parts of the world such as in the ECOWAS region or in the Trans-Saharan region where borders have no signification for Tuaregs (Keuleers, Fonck, and Keukeleire 2016; Wolff 2015).

While many of the works discussed so far have used the EU's relations with third countries as empirical cases, EU studies have only limitedly embraced the decentring agenda. Some EU scholars have been challenging the Normative Power Europe literature (Cebeci 2017; Diez 2005; Sjursen 2006) or have been emphasising the lack of "outside-in" perspectives (Keuleers, Fonck, and Keukeleire 2016) in debates on the EU as a global actor. The literature on Europeanisation beyond the EU has taken into account local actors and domestic contexts both in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. While providing useful accounts of EU-third countries' interactions also on migratory issues, these studies aim at assessing the impact and effectiveness of the EU's external action and do not claim to bring others' perspectives back in.

As argued by El Qadim 2018, unpublished work), this is due, in part, to a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and empirical research. Theoretical proposals to decentre the study of EU external policy tend to remain very much theoretical while empirical studies looking at EU policy from a different perspective engage with other debates taking place in the study of the EU. It follows that, from an empirical point of view, dynamics involving the EU are not deconstructed enough. From a theoretical perspective, decentring efforts remain limited to post-colonial debates with limited interaction with research puzzles of mainstream theories and scarce opportunities for "theoretical proliferation" (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013).

Moving the Decentring Agenda Forward

The disconnect between theoretical programmes and empirical works is not only specific to the ongoing decentring debate. This was highlighted by Bonjour et al. who argued that to move the agenda on EU migration policies and politics forward, "the field would benefit from more clarity on the implicit assumptions held, and the level of analysis adopted, by researchers". Scholars should "think about the contested concepts that lay at the core of the debates" (Bonjour, Ripoll Servent, and Thielemann 2018). Similarly, the first step towards advancing a decentring agenda on migration governance in the Mediterranean involved stepping outside established analytical frameworks and observing which neglected perspectives emerged. In our decentring effort, we identified at least two important areas where these overlooked perspectives become evident. First, the identification of actors, the assessment of their agency, and the categorisation of interactions between actors; second, the spatialities and the temporalities assumed and entailed by migration governance processes.

Actors and Agency

There is little doubt that actors and agency in migration policy-making have been studied more than other analytical concepts. It is fair to say that we now have a better understanding of the "complex array of actors operating at – and often across – each level" (Hampshire 2016) and also of the role that non-European actors play. In the Mediterranean context, several studies have highlighted the leverage that MENA states have been acquiring vis-à-vis European states on the issue of migration over the last decade (Limam and del Sarto, 2015; Cassarino 2007). Considering the high degree of interdependence between the two sides, the leverage held by MENA countries mainly results from Europe's attempts to co-opt MENA governments in the management of migration flows to Europe and thus to "socialise" MENA states.

Despite this dynamism, a decentred approach to actors and agency is required for at least two reasons. First, on both sides, the actors´ landscape is not sufficiently explored, as state actors are the main focus of the analysis. For instance, there have been claims about changing balances of power at the local and regional level – such as new emerging "spaces of mobility" (Garelli and Tazzioli 2016), new centre-periphery dynamics (Mingione 1999; Scholten and Penninx 2016), or regional reconfigurations resulting from resettlement – but agency within these new "spaces" has received little attention (Doomernik and Ardon 2018). Moreover, scholars informed by an autonomous migration perspective have been increasingly studying migrants' agency (Liempt and Doomernik 2006; Triandafyllidou 2019, 2007) and there is substantial agreement on a structure-agency impasse. Yet, efforts to advance theorising to

overcome this stalemate have been limited (Bakewell 2010; Squire 2017). These new spatialities need to be explored as they provide different and complex conclusions on agency. While in the case of Syracuse, its emergency model was very much designed by local communities around a community of practice that helped to shape an operational management of the crisis that was bottom-up (Panebianco 2020) and did not occur within a national setting, but from scratch at the local level.

Second, and perhaps more important, the co-constitutive nature of the "self" and the "other" is severely underexplored. Research on actors beyond the state or actors from the periphery tends to study categories individually – for instance through in-depth cases on the role of civil society, migrants' networks, or security actors – rather than in their complex interactions. In her analysis of the 2015 migration crisis in this special issue, Pinar Bilgin shows how "irrational" ideas about women in the Muslim world, which migration flows threaten to export, have been "constituted though geopolitical encounters between the Saudi royal family and its 'rational' allies" (Bilgin 2020, XX). Similarly, Landau and Freemantle refer to the "quest to perfect the sedentary African subject" as part of European narratives that reproduce well-rehearsed colonial identities, legitimising centres as the drivers and reference points of progress. "In this narrative, Africans are victims of themselves, threatening their futures with their mobility desires. Stuck in the traditional and tribal, Africans are only dragged into progress with great difficulty. Their continent remains stuck, delayed at best and timelessly stagnant at worst" (2020, page). Acknowledging these constitutive relations leads to very different readings of the migration processes from the South/East to the North/West, their impact, and on power dynamics inherent in portrayals of migration.

Third, while there is some research on how third countries are domestically dealing with migration (Adam et al. 2020; İçduygu 2015; İşleyen 2018b; Natter 2021), there is very limited knowledge (Betts 2011; Collyer 2016; Hansen, Koehler, and Money 2011) of whether and to what extent agency at the local level is changing and how, if at all, this is affecting policy outcomes. Overall, against a flourishing debate on the externalisation of migration governance by the EU suggesting power shifts among agents, there seems to be a substantial inability to agree on the nature and the degree of power reconfigurations. Unlike the example of the Syracuse model, the study of the role of local actors in the context of Morocco is not necessarily a sign of empowerment of local communities. On the contrary, Kutz and Wolff (2020) show in this special issue that the rescaling of migration governance in Morocco around international projects that promote the role of cities in migration management, is mostly superficial and does not challenge the autocratic securitisation of demographic mobility. This study thus cautions us against the 'localist trap' (Purcell 2006) and demonstrates that more knowledge is needed about local agency in non-European contexts. Calls for a local turn in third countries need

to also involve a deep understanding of the legitimacy and accountability dynamics at hand (Kutz and Wolff 2020). In their contribution on the securitisation by Turkey of asylum and migration issues, Kaunert and Leonard revisit a theory often applied to EU policy to show that external actors can also contribute to the framing of an issue as securitised. Securitisation is not an EU-specific speech act or practice, but can be exploited and mobilised by third countries too (Léonard and Kaunert 2021).

Analysing the Governance Process: Beyond Established Spatialities and Temporalities

Policy processes result from actors´ interactions in specific spaces over time. Therefore, to understand trajectories, one should engage with the spatial and temporal dimension of governance (Hufty 2011).

The spatial dimension of international migration has long attracted the attention of scholars and partly drove the path towards the spatial turn across the social sciences in the ´80s and ´90s (Warf and Arias 2008). However, the construction of the Mediterranean space as one of migration and the resulting research on the spatial implications of the EU´s migration policies only dates back to the early 2000s. Since 2003, migration management and border control became pivotal in framing the EU's approach to the Southern Mediterranean, and the policy responses to the refugee crisis since 2015 offered rich empirical cases to explore the making and re-making of the Mediterranean space. The spatial implications of distinguishing – through migration-related provisions included in Euro-Mediterranean agreements – between destination, transit, and origin countries came to integrate, for instance, the literature on the (de)construction of the Mediterranean as a regional space as a result of the "bilateral turn" of the EU through the European Neighbourhood Policy. This political, but also academic, attention on transit countries has, according to some, plunged the Mediterranean space into a "cartographic trap, that still underpins accounts of the Mediterranean of migration, fixing the understanding of a spatial process to its edges" (Garelli and Tazzioli 2016). Indeed, while providing relevant accounts of spatial phenomena at Europe´s borders, these analyses fail to target frontiers other than those facing Europe. On a similar note, Pallister-Wilkins notes that framing migration and mobility in the Mediterranean as a crisis resulted in shrinking the geographical referent, overlooking that for migrants, the Mediterranean is "only a constructed space that they traverse on their journeys" (Pallister-Wilkins 2016). It also brought under the spotlight the "performances of crisis", such as big border control operations (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016), thereby stimulating the debate on borders and bordering in EU and border studies. Both have highlighted the expansion and multiplication of borders and defined the EU´s activities as

externalisation practices (Bialasiewicz 2012; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2016; Lavenex 2006) either blurring the contours of the so-called EU´s Neighbourhood space and transforming it into a borderland or expanding the Mediterranean region.

The Mediterranean space no longer ends at the territorial limit of the EU (or of the member state concerned) but where border management practices are performed. To avoid oversimplifications of the spatiality of migration governance, there is a need to move away from traditional, often maritime, borders and ascertain how other spaces, such as cities (Mingione 1999; Scholten and Penninx 2016), social media (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Thulin and Vilhelmson 2016), transnational spaces like diaspora networks or smugglers (Collyer and King 2015; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012) or even female bodies, have been evolving as nodal points. This special issue pays special attention to local communities (Panebianco 2020) and cities and urban peripheries (Kutz and Wolff 2020).

Likewise, making sense of the patterns of development involves sequencing situations or moments, while acknowledging the non-linearity of governance processes. Time has rarely been a direct subject of research in migration studies (Baas and Yeoh 2018) and is quite new to International Relations (Hutchings 2008). However, explanations of migration patterns and policies are deeply historicised, and "assumptions of unified and singular temporalities put limits on how world politics can be understood" (Hutchings 2018). In the case of EU-Mediterranean relations, unified assumptions could be policy framework such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, as the starting point of cooperation on migration, or by categorising migrants as permanent or temporary migrants according to the legal arrangements binding them, or by considering the Arab uprisings as the start of the migration crisis. There is, indeed, a lot of work to be done to include time and temporality in research on migration governance. Sociology has, for instance, shown that migration "is not necessarily about transnational mobility but often about not moving at all" (Baas and Yeoh 2018). Time as suspended (Griffiths 2014), or marked by waiting (Villegas 2014), during asylum processing can be, then, a key moment in the governance process rather than the pre-screening phase in the hotspots and changes the narrative(s) of the crisis. If one focuses on migrants' time, it is the result of a complex interaction between social encounters and local economies. Therefore migrant's time and the concept of 'waiting' is more complex than time being simply suspended. Research has shown that waiting is not only time that is 'usurped' by state authorities and criminal networks to make people wait, but it can be also used as a tactic 'to navigate borderwork and inhabit 'state' spaces', as well as being reproduced by migrants who are waiting in a house in Tripoli to get ready to cross the Mediterranean Sea and rely on care and community networks (Achtnich 2021).

In their contribution to this special issue, Landau and Freemantle show how people's orientations towards time and space are connected to governing mobility, racialisation, expropriation, and historical elisions. What Europe is doing now is designed to address inequality and power imbalances as if they exist free from historical obligation. Disentangling and considering these temporalities is part and parcel of a decentring process.

Conclusion

This special issue has embraced a normative and epistemological endeavour to further a decentring agenda by exploring its applicability to the field of migration. Through a variety of rich empirical contributions, it foregrounds *decentred agency* as the focus of analysis as well as *decentred spatialities and temporalities*. These two elements participate in the building of a "research program to study 'Europe' and 'non-Europe' as a whole" (Bilgin 2020).

The decentring agenda presents a challenge to the field of migration as methodological choices are imbued with power asymmetries. Sources, for instance, play a central role in preserving or overcoming biased research on migration. Asymmetry in accessibility, however, is rarely questioned. On the one hand, Western/Northern actors produce a wide range of written documents. On the other hand, written sources from Eastern/Southern countries are not easily accessible, either because they are not included in public archives, or because they are not even part of the political/bureaucratic practice. Combining sources through extensive fieldwork becomes extremely important. In this respect, overcoming disciplinary boundaries is compelling. Bilgin´s use of contrapuntal reading through Fatima Mernissi´s text (Bilgin 2020) shows how the main accounts of fundamentalism and secularism in the Muslim world do not rely on Arab sources and lesser-known outlets, which agree on locating the rise of fundamentalism in the 1950s. Decentring might also take the form of acknowledging the position of the researcher in the research process. Indeed, as argued by Hadj Abdou and Zardo (forthcoming), "researchers are a part of the migration governance system. They produce knowledge, which relies on categorisations. This academic knowledge can be used in 'managing migration', or it might also shape governance processes by contesting established perspectives and categories". This involves in particular a focus on the local to understand "the determinative role of local frictions, refusals, cooperation and adaptation" (Frowd 2021, 18).While this is a common practice in anthropological work (Khosravi 2010), it is less common in political science.

Moreover, we believe that an additional aspect of the decentring agenda in the field of migration governance involves rethinking policy frames and the framing process. Indeed, to inquire about framing means exploring how migration is defined as a social issue and the power relations entailed in this

process. Policies and policy change are affected by those definitions and dimensions that prevail, and the literature has already studied some of the many frames and processes underlying migration governance approaches in the Mediterranean. Beyond EU studies, many have devoted their attention to analysing policy frames as means for advocacy not necessarily ascribed to the pre-decisional realm of politics (Menz 2016). Moreover, Carrera and Hernanz have also shown how the EU migration policy toolbox based on the notion of "smart borders" relies on a de-securitised frame that focuses on the effectiveness of the EU border regime, actors, and tools (Carrera et al. 2015). There is, however, more work to be done on the process of framing both at the individual level and the aggregate level, but also on the linkage between individual studies of framing and collective studies of issue definition. Research on the construction of "otherness" has not been integrated, for instance, in the debate on policy framing, nor has the literature on transit migration (Collyer and de Haas 2012; Hess 2012) on migration as a socio-economic issue or the racialisation of immigration policies. Beyond that, and despite the burgeoning literature on externalisation, there is especially very little knowledge of frames and framing of migration beyond the EU (Hadj-Abdou 2020; Menz 2016). How are non-EU actors defining migration as a social issue during and beyond their interaction with other actors? How does the variety of policy frames affect the policy-making process? What type of political and social conflicts do they generate within the national borders? As summarised by Triandafyllidou in this special issue (Triandafyllidou 2019): "it is perhaps time to (. . . .) consider how each country is positioned in a complex web of migration relationships that can develop in different directions and that also evolve in time and are intertwined with other policy areas". Looking at the co-constitutive nature of centres and peripheries, rather than substituting established perspectives with new ones, is a task migration researchers need to continuously engage with. This means capturing the interpretations and representations of "what is out there", intended as the causes and effects of international migration (Geddes 2019), and understanding the different "*repertoires* of migration governance" (Geddes 2021, 26).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Federica Zardo http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9465-8182
Sarah Wolff http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6225-3500

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