Transnationalism and the explanation of the continuation of migration in migration systems
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**Abstract**

International migration is a transnational phenomenon. But the concept of transnationalism is applied generally to post-migration developments, and much less to the dynamics of migration itself. This paper examines how transnationalism could be of value in the search for mechanisms and causes driving the perpetuation and transformation of migration flows within migration systems. The migration systems approach focuses on developments in both the sending and the receiving areas, in relation to migration dynamics but within the context of other economic, political, cultural, and social interdependencies between the areas concerned. The transnational paradigm may help to strengthen and to elaborate and make more concrete transnational aspects of the migration systems theory. Transnationalism both offers a general critical paradigm to orient research in a more truly transnational direction, and it offers concrete conceptualizations for analysing meso-level mechanisms. The combination of the migration systems approach with a transnational perspective is demonstrated in this paper by applying it to a prospective research proposal on the continuation of migration flows between Turkey and Western Europe.

**1. Introduction**

Transnationalism is a central concept of contemporary migration studies. But it is primarily applied within the study of post-migration processes, to describe the continuing ties of migrants with their country of origin. Transnationalism is hardly used as an explanatory element in the study of migration processes itself. One could respond that this is quite logical, because migration is inevitably of transnational nature. However, in practice most migration research – at least in Europe - is confined to describing and explaining either inflows in European societies or emigration from sending societies in relation to development issues. This dichotomy is reflected even within the IMISCOE network, with Cluster A1 on migration and its regulation within the receiving societies and Cluster A2 on migration and development in the sending societies. A transnational turn in migration studies may help to overcome this intellectual split, and may give a new impetus to the enterprise to understand and explain the dynamics of migration movements between sending and receiving societies in all its aspects, as well as its impact on these societies.

In this paper I will consider the relevance of transnationalism for the understanding of migration dynamics within European migration systems. The central question is: How may a transnational perspective support the endeavour to understand and explain the perpetuation and transformation of migration movements within European migration (sub)systems?
The motivation for considering this question is related to the intention of a group of researchers within the IMISCOE A1 Cluster to develop a project proposal on migration between Turkey and Europe (see Cluster A1 work programme October 2007 to September 2008). The plan is to investigate the dynamics of migration flows within this migration system in relation to the increasing interdependencies between these areas, in order to improve the understanding of the underlying mechanisms of migration dynamics over time. This project should also involve the endeavour to develop plausible future scenarios with regard to migration flows in the case Turkey would accede to the EU and in the case this would not happen.

The intention to develop such project proposal draws on some of the premises of the IMISCOE Feasibility Study EUROLINKS (Entzinger, Fermin, Schoorl 2007). This Feasibility Study indicated potential lines for strategic research in order to understand and explain migration towards Europe more thoroughly, by studying migration within a migration (sub) system in relation to various other connections and interactions between geographical areas concerned. The proposal on migration between Turkey and Europe departs from the migration systems approach as a general framework to better understand the mechanisms underlying migration flows. This systems approach will also be the departing point in this paper. The ideas for a research proposal will be developed further during the spring meeting of the A1 Cluster (on 24-25 April 2008, Leipzig). This paper is meant as a first step in the development of a theoretical framework for the project proposal.

2. A systems approach to migration

The migration systems approach or theory is a relatively recently developed broad, comprehensive framework (Portes and Böröcz 1987; Kritz et al 1992) for studying the dynamics of the perpetuation of international migration between two or more regions in the context of other economic, political, social and cultural linkages. The increased heterogeneous, complex and dynamic nature of international migration since the mid-1970s have highlighted the inadequacy of many of the ‘older’ theories with regard to explaining migration (Kritz et al., 1992; Massey et al., 1998). For this reason, more encompassing frameworks have emerged, striving to deepen the understanding of international migration. The migration systems approach is one of the more promising of them.

At the basis of the systems approach is the concept of a migration system constituted by a group of countries that exchange relatively large numbers of migrants for a certain period of time (Kritz & Zlotnik 1992: 2). Fig. 1 presents a scheme of a systems approach to international migration.
Some premises:

- The systems approach attempts to consider the entire spectrum of population movements - permanent, temporary, short-term, circular, return - so as to elucidate the interactions between different types of flows and counter flows of different types of migrants (Kritz & Zlotnik 1992: 15). In other words, its intention is to study migration as a dynamic process, and not as a one-time event (Faist 2000: 51).

- As Fig. 1 indicates, both migration and other flows link countries or areas together in a system. International migration is conceptualised as a part of a system that, once it has come into being, tends to become self-feeding and autonomous. Migration flows “occur within national contexts whose policy, economic, technological and social dimensions are constantly changing, partly in response to the feedbacks and adjustments that stem from the migration flow itself” (Kritz and Zlotnik 1992:3). Cumulative causation is the “master mechanism” in this self-feeding process: “rising emigration sets off structural changes that make additional migration more likely and that accelerate changes in the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres. Cumulative mobility is the result.” (Faist 2000: 300).

- The approach attempts to combine a systems approach with an understanding of individual decision-making and behaviour of (potential) migrants. The “mechanisms that influence migration dynamics on the macro level also have a significant impact on the micro-level, i.e. the individual decisions to migrate” (Fassmann et al 2005:25). However, currently there is a growing attention for the further development of the meso-link between macro- and micro-levels, in terms of social networks and social capital (Kritz & Zlotnik 1992, Faist 2000).
The EUROLINKS Feasibility Study proposed in line with the migration systems approach to develop research projects that conceptualise migration as a phenomenon partly caused and evoked by broader economic, political, social and cultural developments and partly contributing to these developments itself (Penninx et al 2006: 313-314). Until now, one international project proposal has been developed and awarded by members of the IMISCOE network that is in line with this suggestion: the MAFE project on Migration between Africa and Europe. This is a 7th Framework Program project initiated by members of the IMISCOE A2 Cluster. Additionally, it is the intention of some researchers of the A1 Cluster to develop another strategic research project focusing on another main European migration system, the one between Turkey and Europe.

This intention is also of theoretical relevance, for the migration systems approach has hardly been put in practice in Europe. Most research is still nation-based and restricted to a receiving-country perspective. Furthermore, migration still tends to be studied as an isolated phenomenon. There are exceptions, for example the international NIDI/Eurostat research project on push and pull factors determining international migration flows, together with the just mentioned MAFE project on migraine between Western Africa and Europe.

How to employ the migration systems approach in a study of Turkish-European migration? A first step towards analysing the system underlying the flows between Turkey to Europe would be to provide an in-depth analysis of the history of the flows as well as of the stocks in these receiving countries, starting from a quantitative description of the inflows and outflows of migrants in the main countries of destination (See: programme IMISCOE cluster A1 conference Leipzig, 24-25 April 2008). To understand the specific dynamics of the Turkish-European migration system, it would be interesting to compare and contrast the developments in the system of Turkey and some of the ‘old’ destination countries (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, etc.) with some of the new ones (the UK, Russia). Additionally, a description and in-depth analysis of the system from the perspective of the sending country is required.

One element of the next step would be to analyse major structures and developments in both sending and receiving societies that shape migration processes, especially immigration and emigration policies and relevant economic and labour market developments. However, the question is how to link such developments on macro-level to micro-level decisions of migrants? And will the design to depart from a quantitative description of the migration system not inevitably lead to a too static picture of migration processes?

This kind of problems is partly intrinsic to the migration systems approach. As Arrango (2000: 292) states, although the intention of this approach to study “migration flows as a part of other flows and exchanges of various nature” is promising, “the full potential of the approach still remains at the stage of promise”. Further, the migration systems approach focuses on a high level of abstraction and - although it encompasses various levels of analysis – the emphasis is on the macro-structures. Additionally, because the migration systems approach suggests to start with identifying and describing a migration (sub) system in quantitative terms, this might easily result in a quite static picture of migration, due to the limitation of the available official, national data on migration flows and stocks. Return migration and all kinds of back-and-forth movements are not captured by such data. As will be argued in the next section, a transnational perspective together with a focus on migrant agency could help to overcome several of these problems.
3. Transnational perspective on migration

How may insights and concepts from the study of migrant transnationalism supplement the application of a migration systems approach in the endeavour to understand migration dynamics?

Transnationalism in migration studies refers to the actions, relationships and institutions of migrants that cross the boundaries of nation-states. These transnational phenomena are studied with the help of a variety of theoretical notions. There is a great variety of approaches in migration research utilising the concept of transnationalism and defining it in various ways. Some researchers claim that transnationalism has its greatest utility as a ‘troubling concept’ or as a paradigm (Dunn 2005). In this section I will argue that transnationalism may be of relevance for the understanding of migration dynamics within European migration systems in two ways: (1) as general, critical paradigm and (2) by offering more specific relevant theoretical notions and insights for analysing transnational phenomena.

Transnationalism as critical paradigm.
As Vertovec (1999: 459) indicates, “transnationalism’ provides an umbrella concept for some of the most globally transformative processes and developments of our time”. Transnationalism as a ‘troubling general concept’ or paradigm offers a renewed holistic perspective for migration studies (Dunn 2005). One of its central premises is the recognition “that society and the nation-state are not one and the same” (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). In this sense, its utility derives from the critical perspective it offers.

- It may help to overcome the intellectual compartmentalization of the subject of migration research, in studies of immigration into receiving countries, studies of emigration and development in sending countries, studies of return migration, studies of internal and forced migration, and studies of integration and settlement of migrants. Transnationalism may offer a renewed holistic paradigm for studying migration. The same may apply to the migration systems approach, but this perspective is too complex and of a too high level of abstraction to be of appeal in practice. Transnationalism as paradigm is more attractive, due to the simplicity of its basic ideas and due to its focus on migrant agency. And focussing on transnational phenomena almost naturally requires methodologies to research both ends of the migration chain.

- Transnationalism further directs attention to non-migrants involved in transnational networks, such as the 2nd generation and those who stayed behind in the land of origin. And it also focuses on other interrelations than those of movement of people, for example money and social remittances and their effect on the society of origin.

- As a methodological paradigm it may help to overcome methodological nationalism. The transnational perspective implies abandoning methodological nationalism and a redirection of the research focus from place to mobility and from society of origin or destination to the movement involved in sustaining cross-border livelihoods (Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen 2004).
Migration and transnational social spaces

Apart from this critical role, all kinds of theoretical notions and insights from the study of migrant transnationalism are of relevance for understanding contemporary processes of international migration. More in specific, transnationalism could supplement a migration systems approach in various ways (see Faist 2004: 23-24):

- It supplements the predominantly macro-level analysis of the migration systems approach with offering conceptualizations of meso-level mechanisms in both sending and receiving societies.
- It brings the migrants as actors back in the picture, both with regard to processes of migratory movements and with regard to processes of settlement, as well as the interrelation of both.
- It offers concepts for analysing the processes of the impact of migration on the society and polity of the sending and receiving countries, and how these in turn may have repercussions for the settlement processes and policies of immigration and integration, that may in turn have an impact on migratory movements.

In the intended Turkish-European migration research proposal we have already opted for a focus on the role of migrants, migrant communities, organisations, institutions, and other intermediary organisations. The perpetuation of migration within this migration system is fed in important measure by the existence of a large Turkish community in Europe and their ties with compatriots in Turkey.

The remainder of this section will present and discuss some relevant insights and concepts from the study of transnationalism that are of value for a deeper understanding migration flows within a migration system, like the one encompassing Turkey and Europe.

Theories of international migration habitually focus on micro-level actors or macro-level structures in their attempt to explain migration. The migration systems approach combines both levels of analysis, but still is predominantly a macro-level approach. To link the micro-level of individual decision making with the macro-level structures, it is essential to pay due attention to the meso-level actors, organisations and networks (Faist 2000; 2004). Network theory is habitually employed for this job in explaining the continuation of migration flows. But, as Faist (2000) rightly underscores, network theory cannot fulfil this job properly. It results in a formal analysis and focuses on kinship networks. For a deeper understanding of migration decisions, one have to focus not only on the structure of networks of these persons, but also on the content of their ties with significant others and relevant organisations (Faist 2000: 294). That implies: investigating how transnational contacts, exchange of goods, ideas, values and so forth help to maintain networks and fill these networks with content, with norms of solidarity, mutual obligations and reciprocity.

A promising concept for the study on the ‘crucial meso-link’ is the notion of ‘transnational social spaces’ (Faist 2000). Transnational social spaces are “relatively permanent flows of people, goods, ideas, symbols, and services across international borders that tie stayers and movers and corresponding networks and non-state organisations; regulated by emigration and immigration state policies” (Faist 2000: 308). Thus the flows of people are just one aspect of transnational spaces, while they are seen as closely interrelated with other linkages. The social and symbolic ties “have to reach beyond tightly-knit social units to enable travel, work, and housing abroad for masses of people” (Faist 2000: 303). Forging these costs considerable time, and the outcomes may vary for countries, times, countries, places, groups, and sub-groups. In relative new migration destinations of for example Turks, such as Russia, these
transnational spaces are in construction and this will in turn determine the patterns of migration and migrant incorporation.

I will illustrate the relevance of this concept of transnational social spaces with some findings of research amongst irregular migrants in the four main Dutch cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht (see Engbersen, San, Leerkes 2006). They found various spatial and ethnic patterns of incorporation of irregular migrants in these cities, with different patterns of ethnic incorporation prevailing amongst different ethnic groups. A transnational pattern of communal sharing and of substantial help given to an exclusive group of relatives was predominant amongst Turkish migrants. A ‘bounded solidarity pattern’ of incidental aid given to the wider circle of compatriots, was found especially among Moroccans and African groups. The researcher further found a ‘market pattern’, a patterns of informal market relations providing jobs, housing, documents and so forth to irregular migrants. This pattern appeared to be of crucial relevance especially for irregular East-European migrants.

The three different patterns of ethnic incorporation prevalent amongst different ethnic groups presuppose different norms of solidarity. Furthermore, the transnational community pattern, that appears to be typical for Turkish migrants in the main cities implied a more or less organized form of migration within a transnational community (Engbersen et al 2006: 219). This example shows clearly the importance of investigating the content and development of transnational networks. Norms of solidarity and reciprocity cannot be presupposed, but they are (re)created and institutionalized in processes of settlement and formation of transnational spaces. For that reason they may differ between transnational ethnic communities. They may also vary because of differences within ethnic communities, due to differences in composition (with regard to social class, religious and ethnic minorities, sex, etc.). These patterns may change over time, because of modifications in the settled migrant communities with for example the growing up of next generations. But as relevant are policy changes in receiving or sending societies. For example, due to a tougher Dutch policy of internal control with regard to employing irregular migrants, these migrants have more difficulty to find jobs. This has as a consequence that irregular migrants tend to become dependent on family members for a longer period. In the long run it will become too demanding to maintain the strong solidarity presupposed by the communal sharing pattern. Thus, this will lead to a modification in norms of reciprocity and solidarity and in the related patterns of ethnic incorporation (Engbersen et al 2006).

The example of the patterns of incorporation of irregular migrants in Dutch cities clearly shows that settled migrants and (potential) migrants may live a transnational social live in transnational communities. The notion of transnational spaces is helpful to understand how the social live of persons, such as migrants, cross the borders of nation-states. The continuation of migration may be organized, such as family migration. The perpetuation of migration is also caused by changes in the receiving and sending societies brought about directly or indirectly by (settled) migrants. Due to a rather stable demand for cheap, low skilled labour in domestic work and certain industrial and agricultural sectors, irregular labour migration will continue (Engbersen et al 2006: 236). Settled migrant communities may play an important role in continuing these ‘structural determinants of irregular migration’. They play an important role in supporting compatriots with finding accommodation, jobs, and other services, and/or provide these services on a commercial base. Migrants are active in the habitually large formal commercial sector in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods (groceries, garages, etc.), but also in informal and illegal markets. For example, the research of Engbersen et al (2006) revealed that especially Turkish immigrants were active in providing elementary services to all kinds to irregular migrants on a commercial base. It also showed that ethnic
enterprises sometimes actively recruit irregular immigrants in their countries of origin (Engbersen et al 2006: 227).

It is informative to distinguish different types of groups or organisations within transnational social spaces. Faist (2004: 14) distinguishes four ideal-typical types of transnational social spaces. I will discuss his typology and show how these notions may be of relevance for a study on migration within migration systems.

1. Kinship-based transnational groups. These are highly institutionalized cross-border relations within households, families and kinship systems, offering migrating kinship group members (or even friends of friends) a first stop and support abroad. Such networks also funnel the selection of migrants and chain migration, but also money transfers and ideas, information and so forth from migrants to their families back home. The above presented example of irregular migration and incorporation in Dutch cities is of this kind. Reciprocity and solidarity are related to a tight-knit collective. Beck-Gernsheim (2007) shows that migrants’ choice of partners is determined by characteristics of social spaces and social structures that emerge in such spaces. Due to more restrictive immigration policies, marriage becomes a last (legal) route for migration to Europe. And due to changing gender relations in the host society, men and women may prefer for different reasons to marry a partner in the country of the family origin.

2. Transnational circuits that circulate goods, ideas, information and people across borders. Examples are enterprises of business people co-operating across borders, and governed by tit-for-tat norms. Or advocacy coalitions, for instance domestic human rights organisations cooperating with transnational human rights organisations.

Migration may stimulate trade because of preferences of migrants for traditional products of their country of origin, because immigrants can lower the transaction costs of trade with countries of origin, making use of transnational networks and their knowledge of institutions and markets in the country of origin (Gosh 2005; Rath 2006). Migrants may also open new business in their home country through return or circular migration. Dutch second-generation migrants entrepreneurs with Turkish born parents starting IT companies with offices both in Amsterdam and Istanbul, is an example of this.

Faist (2000: 214ff) already underlined the importance of a historical perspective in researching economic transnationalization. For example in the German-Turkish case, three forms of economic transnational phases can be discerned: (a) sending remittances, understandable because of specific reciprocity relations, (b) the growth of immigrant business in the country of settlement, utilizing the asset of strong kinship ties, also to recruit new labour from the country of origin, and (c) the development of transnational coordination of business activities, for example German-Turkish textile companies that move production to Turkey for economic reasons. Comparative phases and patterns can be observed in other European countries. The Turkish garment industry that emerged in various European cities in the 80s and 90s was the result of specific economic developments and opportunities, in which Turkish entrepreneurs could capitalize on their social networks and attract new immigrants to work in the garment industry (Rindoks, Penninx, Rath 2006: 40ff; Raes 2000). However, these Turkish industries declined during the 90s due to the increasing immigration controls in Europe and the growing intolerance for undocumented migrants and informal
economic practices (Rindoks et al 2006). Another factor was the emergence of a second generation of better-educated and integrated Turks who are less oriented on the ethnic market and less dependent on ethnic social capital (Rusinovic 2006). These examples show clearly how migration patterns related to entrepreneurial activities may alter over time, due to changes within sending and receiving societies and within the community itself, but also in relation to global economic developments.

3. Transnational communities, stemming from dense and strong social and symbolic ties, such as village communities and religious or ethnic communities and diasporas (Faist 2000: 312; Faist 2004: 20). Such transnational communities over large distances with more diffuse forms of solidarity and strong symbolic ties are typical formed within diaspora communities. For instance, several Turkish and Kurdish political and religious organisations have developed among these communities in Europe aiming at influencing the political developments in the immigration country and in Turkey. Examples are the Kurdish PKK, the religious organisation Millî Görüş and Alevi organisations (Östergaard-Nielsen 2001). These transnational communities not only constitute transnational spaces to channel ideas and money transfers, but also of people. They offer migrating community members support abroad. But within such transnational communities (or organisations), considerable back-and-forth movements may take place between the diaspora and the homeland, but also within the diaspora. Millî Görüş members have for instance run for political office in Turkey and members of this organisation have joined the ranks in Germany (Avci & Kirişci 2006: 145).

4. Organizations as transnational collective actors, such as social movement organisations, religious organisations, and business organisations. As Faist (2004: 21) remarks, migrants often do not set up such hierarchical controlled organisations, but may use the infrastructure of existing organisations. Examples are the more formal organisation of Millî Görüş and PKK, in which transnational communities of Kurds and Sunnite Turkish groups participate. But there are also transnational organisations set up by the government of the country of origin. An example is the Moroccan ‘Fondation Hassan II pour les Marocains Résident à l’Étranger’, aiming at reinforcing the links between the Moroccan community abroad and Morocco (De Haas 2006). More recently the Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l’Homme (CCDH) has been established, in which immigrants participate. This organisation aims at protecting and promoting human rights in Morocco, but also advising the Moroccan king on migration issues.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have showed how a combination of a migration systems approach and transnationalism may be of utility in studies on the causes and mechanisms of international migration within migration systems. The transnational paradigm may help to strengthen and to elaborate and concretize transnational aspects of the migration systems theory. They can be fruitfully combined as framework for a research project on migration within a migration system. How to put this combination into practice in a research project is another question. All the same, the supplementary relations of these two perspectives may also be of utility in the reverse direction. A migration systems theory complements the focus on micro- and meso-level actors and networks of transnationalism. In this sense a systems theory will be valuable by offering an overall framework to give due attention to macro-level structures.
References


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