International politics of migration in times of 'crisis' and Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic[1]

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Abstract

A much-anticipated end of the COVID-19 pandemic is on the horizon. It is important to reflect on the ways in which the pandemic has impacted the international politics of migration and especially on the migration-security nexus, which is still little understood but affecting policies and population movements with future implications. How the pandemic has shaped tradeoffs between securitization of migration, health, and economic concerns in governing migration? What are the new trends emerging from the pandemic on the migration-security nexus? And how can we study these in the coming years? This Research Note features insights from scholars associated with the British International Studies Association's working group on the 'International Politics of Migration, Refugees and Diaspora'. They argue that the pandemic has exacerbated tendencies for migration control beyond reinforcing nation-state borders, namely through foregrounding 'riskification' of migration discourses and practices, adding to an earlier existing securitization of migration considered as a 'threat'. Digital controls at borders and beyond were ramped up, as were racial tropes and discrimination against migrants and mobile persons more generally. These trends deepen the restrictions on liberal freedoms during a period of global democratic backsliding, but also trigger a countermovement where the visibility of migrants as 'key workers' and their deservingness

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in host societies has been enhanced, and diasporas became more connected to their countries of origin. This Research Note finds that enhanced controls, on the one side, and openings for visibility of migrants and transnational connectivity of diasporas, on the other, are worthy to study in the future as political trends per se. Yet, it would be also interesting to study them as interconnected in a dual movement of simultaneous restriction and inclusion, and in an interdependent world where the power of nation-states has been reasserted due to the pandemic, but migrant transnationalism has remained largely intact.

Keywords: crisis, diaspora, interdependence, migration-security nexus, securitization

1. Introduction

A much-anticipated end of the COVID-19 pandemic is on the horizon. When emerging from such difficult times, it is important to reflect on the ways in which the pandemic has impacted the international politics of migration and especially on the securitization of migration, which is still little understood but affecting policies and population movements with implications for the future. How the pandemic has shaped tradeoffs between securitization of migration, health, and economic concerns in governing migration? What are the new trends emerging from the pandemic on the migration-security nexus? And how can we study these in the coming years?

This Research Note features insights from scholars associated with the *British International Studies Association*'s working group on the 'International Politics of Migration, Refugees and Diaspora'. We shed light on the migration-security nexus, where notions of 'crises' and uncertainty are regularly invoked to justify an urgent introduction of often exceptional 'measures' of population control. This time the pandemic has entered this nexus, framed as a health 'crisis' and oftentimes likened to a 'war' against the virus as an invisible enemy. Lockdowns and movement restrictions were introduced, posing a new blow to the international liberal order. Freedom House observed a drastic democratic decline in 2020–21 (Freedom House 2022), prompting us to think about whether such trends might be reversible and how they concern migration politics more generally.

We argue that the pandemic has exacerbated existing securitization of migrants and migration controls, and created simultaneously more visibility for migrant workers, rights, and diaspora connectivities to countries of origin. Several mechanisms aided the securitization of migration-related discourses and practices. First, beyond reassertion of nation-state borders, 'riskification' discourses emerged powerful, considering countries, migrants, and international travelers as 'risk' categories either by carrying or spreading the disease. Science shows this to be a myth—immigrants carrying disease is a centuries-old trope used to increase anti-immigrant fears and anxieties, not supported by the academic literature (Wong 2020). Second, rapid digitalization measures have exacerbated digital controls. Various tracing apps were introduced, while the European Union (EU) started experimenting on how to enhance digitalization techniques to prevent irregular migrants' crossings and enhance Schengen's borders. Third, discourses and practices during the pandemic drew on and reinvigorated long-standing racial tropes (cf. Mayblin 2022).

We further argue that the pandemic has allowed new trends to emerge on the migration-security nexus. The pandemic has given new visibility to migrants who serve their host country in times of 'crisis,' oftentimes framed as 'heroes' deserving dignified treatment, but often getting treated as expendable 'essential workers', not even given protective equipment. Second, diasporas have become more connected to their countries of origin whether after returning 'home' to seek social security or medical care, or after being expelled in line with enhanced procedures for voluntary and involuntary 'return'. Diasporas have also provided medical equipment, financial resources, and expertize from abroad (Kalantzi 2020).

We discuss these ideas in more detail next and consider further research avenues at the migration-security nexus.

2. Accelerating trends for migration securitization and control

Migrant populations have been securitized discursively and in practice in myriad ways, as scholars of the Copenhagen and Paris schools of thought have argued insistently (Buzan 1991; Waever 1995; Huysmans 2000; Bigo 2002). Both 'crisis' talk and invocations of 'security' present depoliticizing moves where urgency and necessity are referenced as the pretext for exceptional measures and the suspension of deliberative democratic procedures. Immigration in receiving countries is discursively constructed as a 'threat' to national security, economic stability, and national identity (Jaskulowski 2019: 711). Migrants are presented as desirable and undesirable depending on their education, economic status, national identity, and other characteristics (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016). Borders are important sites of securitization of migration, meant to deter especially those considered 'undesirable' (Albahari 2015). Muslim identities are also securitized, fueling Islamophobia (De Jong 2022), and 'threatening' what the Copenhagen School of securitization calls 'identity security' of countries with dominant national identities (Waever 1995; Buzan 1991). In the securitization of migration, both politicians and bureaucrats play a role to authorize, legitimize, and justify the role of security professionals (Van Munster 2009: 6).

Linking migrants and especially refugees and diasporas with terrorism, conflict, drug trafficking, and organized crime smuggling is not new. International migration has become a major international security concern, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and continuing attacks in Europe and other parts of the globe (Adamson 2006). As migration links different states through interdependence (Tsourapas 2018; Hollifield and Folley 2022), refugees can be 'weaponized' by the leaders of one state to destabilize another (Greenhill 2010), migration issues could be included in diplomatic bargaining (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019), while transnationalism can increase diaspora agency in conflict processes (Koinova 2021). Given that terrorism was collectively securitized in the EU, refugees and asylum seekers were also collectively considered a 'threat' during the so-called migration 'crisis' in Europe (2015–17). This has prompted Leonard and Kaunert (2019) to speak of a 'migration-terrorism nexus', as the inflow of refugees to Europe has brought spillovers from terrorism into asylum-making policy.

By announcing to European citizens that states are in a 'crisis' and emergency because of migration, European elites created 'crisis narratives' (Squire et al. 2021) and gained capacity to introduce special measures. Some of them violated fundamental human rights, such as launching or tacitly tolerating migrant push-backs, circumventing the rule of law, and displacing the political dialog. The role of detention centers was strengthened. The EU introduced a 'hotspots' approach effectively dehumanizing irregular arrivals when dealing with refugees in transit states, notably Greece and Italy. This reinforced ongoing practices to externalize border controls by the EU, USA, and Australia. It also enhanced the role of Justice and Home Affairs agencies such as FRONTEX, Europol, Eurojust, the European Asylum Support Office, and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. In 2015, the EU Foreign Affairs Council further launched a new mission called EU Naval Force Med to fight against human smuggling and trafficking networks as part of a military crisis operation (Leonard and Kaunert 2019). North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was also involved in contributing to international efforts to stem illegal trafficking and migration in the Aegean Sea. Measures to deal with migration were militarized, transforming EU's borders into the deadliest borders today (Van Houtum and Lacy 2020).

The pandemic entered this political situation, also against the backdrop of other major social transformations vying for urgent attention, such as global economic challenges, accelerating climate change, deepening of social inequalities and discontent, spreading global authoritarianism, reactionary populism, and intense xenophobia coupled with racism. In a growing global disarray, the pandemic reinforced trends for greater state control. Controlling migration at borders and beyond is not new, as states have developed more coercive capacities in the 21st century (Ellermann 2009), even if economic concerns have remained high (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrendus 2014), migration integration policies have become less restrictive (De Haas et al. 2018), and citizens have preferred more EU external border controls than restrictions on free movement within Europe (Lutz and Karstens 2021).

However, during the pandemic state control took a new high. Concerns about the economy were rapidly traded off with policy responses taking on authoritarian traits even in liberal democracies, with lockdowns, curfews, and travel restrictions introduced alongside stringent measures on asylum and irregular migration. Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on the migration-security nexus needs to be assessed in the wider context of such large social transformations, bringing forth also generational differences regarding entrenched racial hierarchies and inequalities, alongside more traditional concerns for migrants' integration and citizenship (Favell 2022).

The pandemic has shown that states have the sovereign power to bring travel and migration to a standstill. The effects of such policies have been uneven on migrants and non-migrants, especially on the undocumented ones (Suhardiman et al. 2021). Thereby, discrimination against sections of the population occurred in various ways, including by closing borders to non-citizens. Furthermore, social distancing measures were introduced differently inside and outside of refugee camps. For example, nearly 200 of the 400 asylum seekers placed in the former army Napier Barracks in the UK, contracted COVID-19 as the limited space did not allow spatial distancing (Taylor 2021). In Greece, where measures of social distancing were applied to the general population, at the end of May 2020,

17,351 refugees lived in the Lesvos reception center with a capacity for 3,300 people (Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos 2020). In September 2020, the Lesvos-based Moria refugee camp was burned down completely after a few camp residents of Afghan nationality set fire. The camp was hosting four times more people than its capacity. Apart from overcrowding and sanitation issues, access to healthcare for refugees on the Greek islands remained extremely limited, with legal and administrative barriers for healthcare provision persisting (Carruthers et al. 2019).

These developments throw new light on the diminished power of human agency, the controllability of migration, and the efficiency of borders. Claims that 'migration policies fail' (Castles 2004), that irregular migration is 'beyond control' (Düvell 2006), that states control migration but are hampered by a 'liberal paradox' (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrendus 2014) or generally that state policies are challenged by a 'mobility turn' (Sheller and Urri 2006) all now require some reappraisal. New or future research may thus take a fresh look at the enhanced state powers to control migration despite unabating interdependence among states and persistent transnationalism.

Although the pandemic has been transnational, ignoring borders and nations, dealing with migration has been often done in the context of securitization of migration within nation-states. In response to the pandemic, new discursive frames were introduced to securitize migration through 'riskification' and even to consider 'risk countries', meaning countries with high infection rates. Such discourses have shaped the ways in which governments think about mobile people. New filters were designed and new means of control were introduced, notably pre- and post-arrival health tests, pre-arrival registration of address and mobile phone numbers, and information and communications technology (ICT)-based tracing and tracking apps. People on the move, and migrants more generally, have been considered at much higher 'risk' as carriers of the disease. Even if COVID-related measures were largely lifted in countries of the Global North (but notably not China), the link between migration and health remains little understood. Riskification enters this gap where sound knowledge based on science is minimal. Riskification gains disproportionate political and policy attention, especially to curb irregular migration to high-income countries (Wickramage et al. 2018).

With the COVID-19 pandemic mapped as a 'risk' onto existing securitization of migration through 'threat' associated with Muslims, terrorism, and the 'exodus' of Afghan refugees from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, we further witness the exacerbation of the politics of unaccountability. Across the world, asylum procedures (Tazzioli 2020), refugee resettlement programs, and family unification visas have been halted or suspended often without consultation or a clear rationale. The USA closed its borders even to Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa holders based in Europe, even if the rate of infection in Germany at the time was lower than in the USA. This draws on but also gives a new twist to long-standing tropes of asylum seekers and refugees 'not simply as *carrying* the disease, but *as the disease*' (Meer et al. 2021). Other migration controls have been intensified. For instance, as Sarah Turner, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service notes when responding to the UK's ramping of Dublin regulations removals: 'Under the cover of Covid and the rush for Brexit, the government is subjecting survivors of trafficking and torture to brutal treatment' (Townsend 2020).

The situation in Mexico reveals yet another way that states have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. Being a migrant sending, transit, and receiving country, Mexico's migration-security nexus is multi-layered, complex, and has 'deepened' over time. This occurred despite the adoption of a general migration law in 2011 that sought to balance migrants' human rights with the state's interest in managing and controlling migration. As has been widely documented, the War on Organized Crime initiated by President Felipe Calderon in 2007 generated heightened level of insecurity, affecting many sectors of society, including Mexican emigrants, return migrants, and transmigrants originating from the Northern Triangle in Central America. Many migrants became victims of cartel violence, as some had to pay for passing through cartel territory, were kidnapped or forced to work for them, were subjected to sexual violence and human trafficking, or were killed (Amnesty International 2010; CNDH 2011; Human Rights Watch 2016). Unfortunately, the state not only failed to protect migrants, but Mexican security sector actors, such as the federal police and the military, also contributed to the violence against migrants. This situation led to the formation of migrant caravans as a way to protect Central American migrants transiting the country on their journey to the Mexico–USA border (Marchand 2021). With the ascent of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to power in 2018, we see an unexpected shift in Mexico's migration policies. Not only did the Mexican government accept the 'Remain in Mexico' policy imposed by the US government, but it also strengthened its border controls at its southern border and in the process militarized the National Institute of Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración). This resulted in a much more repressive approach toward immigrants and asylum seekers in general (Ferri 2021) that carried throughout the pandemic.

For the most unwanted migrants—refugees and irregular immigrants—conditions seem to be becoming even more hostile. New measures were tested, such as quarantine camps, and internment on ships anchored outside national waters. New policies were rushed through during the migration lull, notably the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, and Greece's fortifying of its border with Turkey. It can be expected that just like after 9/11, when advanced passenger information systems and biometric passports, etc. were introduced, these new measures are here to stay (Lazaridis and Wadia 2015). Thus, a 'new era of biosecurity is dawning that will change how people move in the future' (Brady 2020). This requires, on the one side, fresh research on the reconfiguration of labor, family and forced migration channels, and new technologies of control. We need to understand to what degree the pandemic served as an accelerator of restrictive policies to curb migrant agency and thus whether the responses to the health emergency could be understood as what Montano called in 1975 a 'crisis attack'. This means that a crisis is exploited to attack a group in the population, such as the working class or in our case international migrants. Therefore future scholarship needs to track how the politics of exceptionality in both migration and pandemic 'crises' intersect and amplify various unaccountable bordering practices by nation-states and international organizations alike.

The lull of cross-border movements during the pandemic allowed various state agencies and the EU also to buy time and ramp up their earlier efforts for digital migration control. Migration containment was already pursued through various digital and non-digital techniques which Fitzgerald sums up as 'a landscape of domes, buffers, moats, cages, and barbicans' that prevent the 'unwanted from finding refuge' (2019: 5). The pandemic offered

an opportunity to take the digital 'dome' to a whole new level. The introduction of a digital vaccine passport affected citizens and residents who managed to get vaccinated, but vaccination was out of reach to irregular migrants who may have wanted to become vaccinated but refrained from doing so to avoid exposure in a host state and to avoid jeopardizing their immigration status. The UK Joint Council for the Welfare of Refugees found that 'the more precarious a migrant's status, the more likely they are to fear accessing healthcare', because of data sharing between the National Health Service and Home Office: 17% of people with Indefinite Leave to Remain would be fearful, 24% of those with a temporary visa such as a work or spouse visa would be fearful, as would be 56% of refugees and 82% of those without status (Gardner 2021).

A more sophisticated digital 'dome' is currently being erected on Europe's borders. As Gatopoulos and Kantouris argue, the EU spent 3 billion euros into advancing security technology following the refugee 'crisis' (2015–17). Currently, a vast array of new digital barriers is experimented with and tested to stop people from entering the EU illegally. Observation towers are being equipped with 'long-range cameras, night-vision and multiple sensors' to generate data that will be sent to control centers and bring awareness of suspicious movements, to be analyzed with artificial intelligence. An automated surveillance network is currently built on the Greek–Turkish border aiming to detect migrants and deter them from crossing, 'with river and land patrols using searchlights and long-range acoustic devices'. Efforts are made to integrate artificial intelligence (AI)-powered lie detectors, virtual border-guard interview bots, satellite data with drones footage on land, sea, and underwater, and use palm scanners and other biometric and digital identifiers to control migration at borders and beyond (Gatopoulos and Kantouris 2021). Such scaling up of digital control raises various issues that we need to study in the near future. These include how digital techniques are used formally and informally, how data are gathered, analyzed, and stored and by whom, and how such digitalization is considerate or inconsiderate of ethical standards that apply to general populations, also under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Some of these measures have lost visibility in recent months due to a positive image painted regarding the treatment of more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Despite increased digital and other controls, open borders were introduced in the EU to accommodate the Ukrainian refugees. Most entry and health controls were lifted for them, including the need to prove COVID-19 vaccination and negative tests. Such measures have been supported by earlier granted visa-free travel into the EU and a Temporary Protection Directive, invoked for the first time (Koinova 2022), as well as permission to work in the EU. The obligation to provide international protection was prioritized over the requirement to protect the national populations from the perceived spread of the virus due to human mobility. This implies that the securitization of migration on grounds of health concerns may well be limited if intersecting with other concerns, and if the migrants in question fit the profile of neighbors and 'good', "European" citizens' (Lyubchenko 2022), aided by historical commonalities and their whiteness and gender. The war in Ukraine is also taking place at a time when the majority of receiving populations have already been vaccinated. However, restrictive measures remain intact for other refugees and migrant flows, and even for the mobility of Ukrainians to the post-Brexit UK. It should still be noted that Ukrainian refugees are treated in

Europe within a dominant geopolitical context of an ongoing war, where a security dynamic (at least temporarily) overwhelms other dimensions of migration policy.

We also need to look into how the intersectionality of migration and racial differences are securitized. Former US President Donald Trump spoke with racist references about the 'Wuhan Virus' and the 2020 killing of George Floyd in the US launched a global movement raising issues of race. Beyond such overt practices, structural racism in legacies of imperial relations and the patriarchal hierarchies within Western framings of the world permeate and dominate spaces and places where migrants concentrate (Grosfoguel, Oso and Christou 2015). This includes the border and the camp, besides higher-risk precarious occupations in the agricultural, health care, service, and transportation sectors, where many migrants and diasporas work. The pandemic shifted concerns about economic interests to those on values, culture, race, ideology, and to the symbolic aspects of politics (Hollifield and Foley 2022: 9).

3. New trends within the migration-security nexus

Migrants are, of course, not passive recipients of these new forms of governance and securitized discursive frames. Pro-migrant civil society organizations and other actors have also creatively responded to such shifts. Hence, migration research in a pandemic and post-pandemic time would be enriched by a conceptual frame that brings together top-down analyses of changes in migration governance and discourses with the bottom-up migrant-centric approaches, to capture the dynamic interplay between both.

For instance, the 'International Detention Coalition', which advocates for 'Alternatives To Detention', and anti-detention social movement organization 'Movement for Justice', highlighted that in some countries migrants were released from detention as a way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This could demonstrate that 'migration can be governed without immigration detention' (International Detention Coalition 2020; Ironmonger 2020).

In another example, since the Mexican government did not take any specific COVID-related measures toward migrants (Ureste and Pradilla 2020), such lack of attention was criticized by civic organizations in defense of migrants' rights. They even won a court case against the National Institute on Migration (INM), considering that the INM had not adopted the necessary protocols and measures to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. The court ordered the INM to release vulnerable populations from detention centers and to implement measures to increase access to health services, safe drinking water, healthy meals, and personal hygiene products (CMDPDH 2020).

Moreover, the newly found appreciation for those falling under the category of 'key workers' allowed some migrants to adopt or be attributed a positive identity through which they could claim deservingness based on their contribution to the host society. In some discourses, they were even framed as 'heroes' fighting the virus, an invisible agent that has launched human suffering akin to a war. While migrants' 'performance-based deservingness' linked to employment is not a new phenomenon (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014: 427), the category of the 'key worker' has made some bottom-rung jobs that often lack recognition, increasingly visible and appreciated, such as warehouse workers and taxi drivers. Across the world, refugees have been enlisted by refugee

organizations to produce masks. These projects tend to be showcased as a way to offset negative discourses of refugees as a drain on society. As the Borgen project puts it, 'refugees making face masks is one way they are giving back' (Fallon 2020; Oomen 2020; UNHCR 2020; Van der Toorn 2020).

The pandemic has also given new visibility to the relative overrepresentation of migrant staff in medical and care professions in some countries, such as the UK, and the precarious legal status of some of these professionals. The case of the Egyptian National Health Service (NHS) doctor Enany who became critically ill with COVID-19 led the UK Home Office to issue the following statement:

> We've worked closely with Dr Enany's family during this very difficult time to assure them they are here entirely legally and have every right to remain in the UK, and we have provided them with an extension to their visa, which will not affect their pathway to indefinite leave to remain, to allow him to recover. Health and social care professionals from all over the world play a vital role in hospitals and care homes across the UK and we are hugely grateful for their work. (quoted in Taylor 2020)

Research is needed to track these emerging discursive openings, whether they are short-lived or lead to long-term shifts and whether they solidify existing narrowing notions of deservingness or can lead to more expansive notions of inclusion.

The pandemic has also impacted in an unexpected way the return of migrants and diasporas to their original homelands, voluntarily, or involuntarily. In the EU, where especially Eastern European migrants and diasporas have maintained marginal and precarious jobs without established health insurance, many returned 'home' to seek social security and be close to family. As the Economist pointed out, in 2020, there was a large-scale wave of reverse migration, even if the exact numbers are not clear. An estimated 1.3 million Romanians and 500,000 Bulgarians returned to their countries of origin. Lithuania and Poland saw similar trends with more citizens returning than leaving (28 January 2021).

Such trends were seen as positive by Eastern European politicians for both people and the economy, as they argued for decades about the negative effects of 'brain-drain'. Nevertheless, such return was securitized discursively as well. In Bulgaria, for example, an especially grim coverage received temporary workers who returned sick with COVID-19 from the Netherlands in May 2020. Since some of them traveled unimpeded by bus and taxi to their homes in southeastern Bulgaria (Haskovonet 2020), the then Prime Minister Boyko Borisov called their behavior 'criminal', argued that it is not wrong to aid Bulgarians to return, but to hide the disease at the border (Standart 2020).

Economic concerns rarely trumped those health related. While Eastern European workers were sought at the onset of the pandemic for agricultural work in Western Europe, and some were even flown with charter flights to perform precarious jobs, their return to the countries of origin was voluntary. Involuntary deportations concerned many more. In Mexico, authorities continued deporting Central American migrants to their home countries without even prior testing them for the virus. This resulted in a diplomatic row with President Nayim Bukele of El Salvador who claimed that Mexican authorities knowingly deported 20 migrants infected with COVID-19 (Animal Político 2020). Simultaneously, Mexico received many Mexican and Central American deportees from the USA, most of whom were not tested as well.

After losing jobs and being at higher risk for infection, many migrants returned to their homelands globally. As the Migration Data Portal points out, many were returned through bilateral negotiations, allowing for temporary border openings. India has seen the largest number of returnees with official repatriation operation facilitating the return of more than 2.4 million stranded Indians from around the world (Migration Data Portal 2021). Other 932,000 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan, and more than 136,000 Venezuelan migrants and refugees returned to Venezuela from other Latin American countries (IOM and UN OCHA, 2020 quoted by VAM (2020)). More than 28,000 returned to Ethiopia from neighboring African countries and as far as Saudi Arabia (IOM, 2020).

We hence argue that while return migration has been studied more recently from the perspective of refugee return, the pandemic-induced return could open new avenues to study the intersection between mobility, brain-drain, and brain-gain, and state policies taking advantage of such massive yet idiosyncratic trends to control especially irregular migration, on the one side, and open opportunities for return migrants, on the other.

4. Conclusions

This Research Note seeks to take stock of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the international politics of migration at the migration-security nexus. We argue that the pandemic has exacerbated tendencies for migration control by foregrounding 'riskification' of migration discourses and practices, adding to an earlier existing securitization of migration considered as a 'threat'. Furthermore, digital controls at borders and beyond were ramped up, as were racial tropes and discrimination against migrants and mobile persons more generally. These trends deepen the restrictions on liberal freedoms during a period of global democratic backsliding, but also trigger a countermovement—with some activities launched strategically, and others emerging more organically—where the visibility of migrants as 'key workers' and their deservingness in host societies has been enhanced, and diasporas became more connected to their countries of origin.

In these concluding remarks, we emphasize that such trends are taking on 'regional' dynamics. Although the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees (2018) have established a global legal framework for enhanced cooperation, the pandemic has undermined this significantly. Nation-states, reasserting their sovereign power, have issued idiosyncratic responses to the pandemic itself, and to the mobility of people regionally. In Europe, for example, political elites used the lull of the pandemic to develop a new Compact on Migration and Asylum, increasing migration controls while undermining protection. Borders were fortified for unwanted refugees and especially for irregular and mixed migration flows, military security practices increased, politics of unaccountability enhanced, and new digitalization measures developed at rapid speed to enhance what Fitzgerald (2019) called a digital 'dome' hovering above migrants who aspire to enter or stay in Europe. Simultaneously with trends for increased control, however, Ukrainian refugees were granted free movement, protection, and rights within the EU. Such policies did not include refugees from other parts of the globe, nor did Ukrainians get a similar blanket entry into the UK, seeking to reassert its state borders after Brexit.

In Latin America, where governments spent little effort to control the pandemic itself and policies were haphazard and inconsistent, Central American and Mexican migrant flows resumed in the second half of 2020 after an initial shutdown. The pandemic-related economic crisis in the region, in combination with two hurricanes (Eta and Iota) that devastated Central America, and the official discourse by the Biden administration in early 2021 to change the Trump administration's migration policy, account at least partially for the increase of migratory flows in the Central American–US corridor. Yet, risks related to transit migration have not subsided, and migrants continue to be found dead in the vicinity of the US–Mexico border (BBC Mundo 2021).

Meanwhile, the pandemic intersects with new crises, notably the displacement from Ukraine bringing in larger geopolitical and security dynamics, and complicating further developments. Certain measures have actually been discontinued for some groups, due to an important liberal principle, solidarity at least with Ukrainian refugees. This goes to show that the latest trend toward enhanced securitization of migration is not universal but targeting certain groups more than others. The treatment of Ukrainians may give us a glimpse of hope that, despite the increased digital and bureaucratic control that seems to be here to stay, the pandemic has not yet delivered a deadly blow on liberalism as such. Yet it also alludes to global positive discrimination within liberalism for some and restrictivism for others (De Coninck 2022).

This Research Note finds that enhanced controls, on the one side, and openings for visibility of migrants and transnational connectivity of diasporas, on the other, are worthy to study in the future as political trends per se. Yet, it would be also interesting to study them as interconnected in a dual movement of simultaneous restriction and inclusion, and in an interdependent world where the power of nation-states has been reasserted due to the pandemic, but migrant transnationalism has remained largely intact. Studying these trends in the context of a 'new normal' that emerges at present is necessary to both shed analytical light on rapidly developing political and social processes and to avoid gaps in attention that can be used to undermine migrants' freedoms and protection, and increase their vulnerabilities, inequalities, and control.

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