



Transit mobility governance in Turkey



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1. Introduction

How does Turkey govern what is called ‘transit mobility’¹ heading towards the European Union (EU)? The concept of transit mobility in relation to Turkey is used to describe irregular movements of persons who use Turkey as a transit country to enter the EU (Hess, 2012; İçduygu & Yükseser, 2012). Since the mid-1990s, the increasing importance of Turkey as a major country for irregular mobility towards Europe has become a key topic of concern for the EU (İçduygu, 2011). This has sparked scholarly interest in the examination of Turkey and transit mobility. Studies have examined the geographical origins, routes and types of mobile populations and the socio-economic dynamics of transit in Turkey (İçduygu & Toktaş, 2002; İçduygu & Kirişçi, 2009). Furthermore, numerous works have examined the interplay between Turkish management of human mobility and its accession negotiations with the EU (Paçacı-Elitok, 2013; Özçürümez & Şenses, 2011; İçduygu, 2007, 2011; İçduygu & Üstübcü, 2014). They have argued that the EU has sought to externalize its border and human mobility regime by exerting pressure on Turkey to reform its policies in accordance with those of the EU (Düvell, 2012; Paçacı-Elitok, 2013). İçduygu (2011, p. 2) notes that the good governance of transit mobility has become “a type of conditionality for the progress and completion of membership talks” and generated different degrees of reforms and legal developments in Turkey.

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¹ The concept of migration is problematic as it establishes false dichotomies between ‘economic migrants’, refugees and asylum-seekers in political discourse, policies and academic studies. In order to go beyond these dichotomies, I will henceforth replace the term ‘migration’ by terms such as ‘mobile populations’, ‘mobile individuals’, ‘mobility’ and ‘movement’.

While these studies have emphasized the historical-structural dimensions, political economy, the legal basis and foreign policy aspect of the topic, the actual governance of transit mobility in Turkey and its wider effects for the EU have yet to be analyzed. This article aims to fill this gap. To that end, it utilizes a “practice approach” (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, & Salter, 2014; Salter & Mutlu, 2013), which focusses on the actual activities and concrete situations through which transit mobility is governed in Turkey. The novelty of the conceptual framework adopted here lies in its examination of everyday strategies and tangible techniques employed by Turkish security officials to govern people moving towards the EU. A triangulated methodology is used to study Turkish practices by combining discourse analysis, interviews with Turkish security professionals and participant observation. The article is built on new empirical data gathered through fieldwork conducted from April to July 2016 in three Turkish cities: Ankara, Edirne and İzmir – with the latter two bordering the EU. While the increasing number of border crossings by Syrian displaced people from Turkish territories to the EU was clearly articulated in the answers by state officials, research findings also cover practices that target individuals beyond the Syrian refugees.

The practice turn in critical studies on security is shaped by a variety of approaches to the study of power, knowledge and governance. This article draws on the scholarship that concentrates on the governing of the population and its circulation (Amoore, 2006; Côté-Boucher et al., 2014; Foucault, 2009; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015b; Parsons & Salter, 2008) and links it to critical border studies on the multiple, diffused and mobile ways in which space and mobility are regulated and constructed (Amoore, Marmura, & Salter, 2008; Bialasiewicz et al., 2009; Coleman, 2007; Johnson et al., 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015a; Rumford, 2006, 2012; Walters, 2004, 2006). While the article does not offer a broader sociological analysis of security practices in a Bourdieusian perspective, it benefits from Bourdieu-inspired methodological questions as regards the object of research as well as the scope and sites of data collection and data analysis (Salter & Mutlu, 2013). As such, the practice approach provides a more empirical and more grounded understanding of the logics, techniques, subjects of power and spatial configurations that operate in the daily governance of transit mobility in Turkey.

It is important to note that the concept of transit is highly disputed for being a problematic category in its meaning and usage.

The concept is said to be “unsettled and highly contested” (Düvell, Collyer & de Hess, 2012, p. 407) and “often negatively connoted and highly politicised” (Düvell, 2012, p. 416; İçduygu & Yükseker, 2012). On the one hand, scholars point to the problematic application of the concept of transit to a broad range of human beings, be they irregular migrants, visa over-stayers, refugees and asylum-seekers, thereby failing to shed light on their diverse biographies and experiences (Düvell, 2012; Hess, 2012). Based on fieldwork conducted in Turkey, Wissink, Düvell, and van Eerdewijk (2013, p. 1102) question the usefulness of “intentionality” as a category of conceptualizing transit mobility and find that not all people in an irregular status in Turkey have the initial objective of using the country as a transit. Instead, many decide on further movement towards Europe after a considerable amount of time and due to economic hardship, legal difficulties and social exclusion that they face in Turkey (Brewer & Yükseker, 2009). On the other hand, studies have highlighted how the EU's policy discourse around transit migration turns neighboring countries into risky geographies and “reinforces the EU efforts to externalise migration control and integrate non-EU countries into a comprehensive migration policy” (Düvell, 2012, p. 416), including Turkey in the context of its membership negotiations with the EU (İçduygu, 2011).

This article is aware of and by no means refutes the literature emphasizing the contested meaning of transit. Rather, it makes a different move and aims to advance the literature by taking the transit scholarship into unexplored directions. It does so by means of a practice approach that shifts the focus from the level of policy and discourse to an exploration of the actual practices by Turkish security professionals that intervene in the movement of persons from within Turkey towards Europe through interlinked forms of surveillance and control. Thus, the practice approach is not in contradiction with critical transit mobility research. The study addresses some of the key issues that have so far occupied the field of study. While previous research has challenged assumptions of peoples' intentions of transit or the size of transit mobility (Wissink et al., 2013), the practice approach looks at the moment of translation; that is, the moment of intervention by Turkish professionals into the transit movement.

The uniqueness of combining a practice approach and critical border studies lies in that it enables us to go beyond a concentric and territorial understanding of geography and space that has defined previous studies on transit mobility and its governance. As such, the article provides novel insights into the kind of bordering (Johnson et al., 2011; Rumford, 2006) that emerges out of Turkey's policing of human mobility. The conceptual framework of the study helps unpack the interplay between practices, space and mobility and speaks to different debates in critical security studies and border scholarship. To start with, previous research has mostly looked at Africa (Bialasiewicz et al., 2009; El Qadim, 2014; Frowd, 2014), North America (Andreas, 2000) and Australia (McNevin, 2014) to explore the production and reproduction of nation state/regional unit borders through the work undertaken by third countries. This article contributes to this strand of the literature by providing new empirical material relating to the Turkish governance of human mobility at EU borders. Moreover, the study throws into relief the productive effects of border practices in the constitution of new spaces of intervention and mobility (Debrix, 1998; Rumford, 2006). In so doing, it illustrates that transit as a concept is not entirely irrelevant but needs to be studied through an alternative approach that focuses on practices employed across a multiplicity of scales and spaces, thereby “pushing border enforcement inwards” (Coleman, 2007, p. 64). This moves transit mobility scholarship beyond its conventional understanding of territory and adds an exploration of emergent geographies and mobilities within the transit state space. The empirical findings also advance the

literature by calling attention to the notion of “scale” as a key site of bordering, which has received scarce attention in critical security studies despite its conceptual and empirical investigation in critical border studies (Laine, 2016; Paasi, 1998).

The article is structured as follows. First, I will outline the practice approach through an engagement with contemporary scholarship and put forward a research agenda to examine the governance of mobile populations as practice. This includes a discussion of critical border studies with a view to linking this strand of the literature to the practice approach. The merits of the conceptual framework are detailed by reference to the transit scholarship. Second, I will explain the methodology with a focus on the triangulation of data collection and analysis. Here, “the importance and uniqueness of fieldwork research” (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014, p. 197) will be emphasized. Third, I will analyze the empirical material in order to highlight the logics and techniques of Turkish transit mobility governance practices. I will identify checkpoints and the travel document as two central practices enacted by Turkish security professionals for the purpose of policing human mobility towards the EU. The empirical discussion of documents builds upon scholarly work on identification as an instrument of state power over human mobility (Caplan & Torpey, 2001; Gordillo, 2006; Parsons & Salter, 2008; Torpey, 2000) by not only offering its first systematic examination in transit mobility governance but also integrating the notion of scale into the analysis.

1.1. Transit mobility governance: practices and the spatial organization of mobility

This article builds on existing literature on “border security as practice” (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014), which has opened up original and innovative debates in critical security studies as regards to contemporary forms of border and mobility governance (Bigo, 2014; El Qadim, 2014; McNevin, 2014). This literature underscores the importance of studying “border security from the angle of everyday practices of the diverse actors who are appointed to carry it out” (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014, p. 196). The focus moves beyond the discursive and the policy level (Salter and Mutlu, 2013) towards a more empirical and localized account of border governance (El Qadim, 2014; Frowd, 2014; McNevin, 2014).

Practices are sites of ‘translation’ (Bigo, 2014) and “implementation” (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014, p. 198), whereby border governance acquires an essence and takes real shape through contextualized processes of meaning production, action and interaction. Thus, a practice approach is interested in “what actors appointed to secure borders actually do” (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014, p. 196, emphasis in original). It addresses the “ways in which border security is enacted” in and through practices and examines how actors attribute meaning to situations and their actions and devise and implement concrete logics and techniques to address these situations (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014, p. 198). When applied to transit mobility governance, a practice approach concentrates on the very sites and moments in which strategies are being developed and techniques are invented and deployed on an everyday basis in the policing of mobile populations.

The combination of critical security studies and border studies pushes the transit mobility literature into new directions. It does so by providing concepts and insights that enable the examination of both the various forms and diverse locations of border practices and the relationship between practices, space and mobility. Previous research is characterized by what John Agnew calls “the territorial trap” (Agnew, 1994, p. 71). Put differently, the general tendency has been to rely on “territorially embedded understandings of geography, governance” (Paasi, 1998, p. 69) as well as space and mobility. As a result, transit scholarship has adopted a

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