

# 7<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference on Migration Research in Austria

## Follow-up report

From September 26-28, 2022, this year's Conference on Migration Research in Austria took place at the University of Continuing Education Krems. For the first time, this biennial conference was organised by the Department for Migration and Globalisation of the University for Continuing Education Krems together with the Commission for Migration and Integration Research (KMI), the Institute for Urban and Regional Research (ISR), the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) and the Faculty of Social Sciences of University of Vienna. This report will give an exemplary overview.

### Opening and first day

"Globalisation of Borders, Borders of Globalisation" – this was the conference's main theme. It was opened on the morning of September 26 by the Rector of the University for Continuing Education Krems, Friedrich Faulhammer. In his opening remarks, Mathias Czaika, head of the Department for Migration and Globalisation, referred to one of the pioneers of migration research, Stephen Castles, and his book "The Age of Migration", according to which migration is a correlate of globalisation rather than its cause or consequence. Rainer Bauböck (ÖAW) emphasised that globalisation has entered a new phase of poly-crisis, in which migration research is confronted with new questions. The field has arrived at the mainstream of social sciences but should not shy away from facing the great challenges of our time rather than conducting "research as usual".

The conference consisted of three interrelated parts: the main conference, which provided a platform for migration researchers within and beyond Austria, a PhD conference for Austrian young researchers from the field, and a block of panels specifically dedicated to the H2020 project EasyRights. In total, the annual conference included 22 panels on more than 70 papers selected by a committee of experts, as well as two panel discussions, double keynotes, and book presentations each. The first day of the conference included presentations on borders and border regimes, refugee assistance, refugee health and housing, migration policy, and integration.

For example, the panel "Migration and labour across borders" broke down income differences between EU migrants and natives and discussed the role of European tax and benefit systems. According to Katrin Gasior's research, there are also significant negative income effects for EU migrants as well as access problems to benefits for lower-income groups. Marius Braun and Jarom Görts (University of Giessen) showed that migrants in Europe have higher mobility at both the interregional and international levels and contribute to labour market flexibility. Immigration would "oil the wheels of the labour market," Braun and Görts pronounced.

The first conference day also comprised the presentation of recently published book "Das Fluchtparadox: Über unseren widersprüchlichen Umgang mit Vertreibung und Vertriebenen" by Judith Kohlenberger (WU Vienna). Judith Kohlenberger showed that discourses on flight and displacement are fundamental, contradictory, but immanent to the system. She elaborated on the

subcomponents "asylum, refugee, and integration paradox". The contradictory nature of the first partial paradox lies in the fact that one has to "break the law" in order to get asylum. The refugee paradox refers to the fact that society expects refugees to behave like vulnerable individuals in need of protection on the one hand, while on the other hand they shall be willing to perform and act independently. The third sub-paradox shows that the more visible migrants become, the more they get into conflict with the majority society. There is no solution to the escape paradox, but options for action are possible. These options were then discussed with sociologist Christoph Reinprecht (University of Vienna) and asylum law expert Lukas Gahlleitner-Gertz (Asylkoordination Österreich). An essential statement was to show that asylum seekers are not "illegal" and that a right to act in a hospitable manner needs to become possible without societal counter-pressure.

The first day culminated in a double keynote by Ettore Recchi (Science Po, Paris) and Ayelet Shachar (University of Toronto) on the topic of border politics. Ettore Recchi spoke about global visa conditions and the (in)permeability of national borders in different contexts. Referring to German sociologist Steffen Mau, he emphasised that borders are "sorting machines" – never completely closed, but also never entirely open. Very rich as well as very poor countries are those whose borders are most permeable - on average, however, in recent years, borders have tended to develop more towards in-permeability and control. Ayelet Shachar addressed the paradigm of border shifting in a world with increased migration pressure and border policies as a result of COVID-19, which have become substantially more restrictive (not only due to the pandemic).

## **Second day**

The second conference day was again dedicated to the topic of migration, as well as work, borders and asylum procedures, but also important aspects such as solidarity, education, family, religion, and the identity and sense of belonging of migrants. Concludingly, the research field's future was discussed. In a panel on migration and work in urban spaces, Josef Kohlbacher (ÖAW) spoke about diaspora entrepreneurship of Kurdish communities in Vienna and showed which empowerment effects are associated with an active entrepreneurial role. Especially for Kurdish women, a sense of prestige emerges from business start-ups. Despite this feeling, Kurdish entrepreneurs often face challenges such as discrimination, negative labelling, and loss of customers or business partners. These challenges need to be addressed and improved in society. Paul Sperneac-Wolfer (University of Vienna) and Panos Theodoropoulos (University of Glasgow) then talked about the working conditions migrants face in Europe.

On the topic of youth and education, exciting contributions were presented by Theresa Herzog (University of Continuing Education Krems), Elisabeth Gruber (FAU Erlangen), Kirsten Rusert (University of Vechta), and Rashin Lamouchi (University of Victoria). In her contribution on refugee students and students with a migration background from the global south at Viennese universities, Theresa Herzog showed challenges such as a lack of recognition of degrees, non-transparent language requirements, a costly visa, residence and housing situation, and very limited access to the labour market. Elisabeth Gruber addressed the mobility behaviour of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kirsten Rusert showed that labour market integration – at least in its theoretical course – is usually completed quickly, but the process of inclusion is a more complex

and profound one. Rashin Lamouchi dedicated her lecture to the narratives of young forced migrants in Southeast Asia and the notion of belonging in the sense of "feeling at home". Belonging is a luxury good, as this feeling is hard to be experienced where there is insecurity in the world. "The absence of fear signifies the presence of life and security", Lamouchi emphasised.

Likewise, another panel was devoted to the important topic of "religion and radicalisation". Dženeta Karabegović (University of Salzburg) showed that radicalisation takes place in diaspora groups, but that there are also strong anti-radicalisation movements among the identity formation processes of these groups. What is important is for the country of origin and host country to have corresponding handling strategies. Veronika Zimmer (International University of Applied Sciences Essen) emphasised the role of Islamic religious education in the prevention of Islamist radicalisation. Anna-Maria Meuth (University of Münster) presented her research on the prevalence and significance of threat narratives on Muslim migration processes in media debates, emphasising the increasing normalisation of far-right interpretations. Concluding the second day, the EasyRights project held a panel discussion on integration and public services. Gudrun Biffl and Peter Huber presented their book "Migration & Labor", which will be published as part of the KMI book series "Migration & ...".

### **Third day and outlook**

The third day was kicked off with an exciting double keynote by Hein de Haas and Parvati Raghuram on recent developments in migration theory and current debates of migration research. De Haas emphasised above all the interdisciplinary nature of the research field, which extends from cultural anthropology to economics. Migration is an ongoing social process. It is essential to find synergies in disciplinary and methodological fragmentation. Migration should not be seen as a problem to be solved, nor as a solution per se – to the problem of an aging society, for instance – but as a phenomenon of social change. Migration's contributions to the social system are difficult to measure, and it is fundamental, de Haas said, not to drown in empirical details, but to look at the changing global patterns of migration - away from the current Eurocentric focus. Parvati Raghuram then spoke about feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches to research in theory and practice. While from a postcolonial point of view migration research is more about the representation of circumstances, the decolonial view aims at revealing coloniality and changing the status quo. Change – also in a political sense – consists in bringing theory closer to practice. Raghuram sees education as the key to this: with her project "Decolonising Education for Peace in Africa" she starts where the roots for peace are already sprouting and promotes their further development.

The program of the last conference day continued with a panel discussion on the topic "Changing times in refugee policy? Europe's response to flight and displacement from Ukraine", with experts Wolfgang Bogensberger (Representation of the European Commission in Austria), Lukas Gahleitner-Gertz (Asylkoordination Österreich), Irena Remestwenski (University of Vienna) and Albert Kraler (University of Continuing Education Krems). The peculiarities of the current situation compared to the Syrian crisis in 2015 were considered: significant differences emerged in the fact that in 2015 many younger men migrating alone arrived in Austria, but the totality of refugees from Ukraine now consists of about 80% women and their children. While the waiting time for a positive asylum application was relatively long in 2015, the Austrian Minister of the Interior promised this year that Austria would provide rapid and

unbureaucratic assistance – a thoroughly positive attitude, but long-term implementation was lagged behind. Currently, 57,000 people from Ukraine are registered for Austrian social benefits. Half of them are accommodated by private persons. This shows tremendous commitment by civil society and a quick activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. The discussion intensified with regard to the issue of accepting Russian deserters. In particular, Lukas Gahleitner-Gertz named war refusal a clear statement and pointed out that asylum procedures are no sympathy contests. The third day of the conference led into a PhD conference, in which the young researchers of the field presented and discussed their work, as well as EasyRights panels, which continued on September 29. EasyRights as a project aims to provide migrants with better access to understanding and exercising their rights. Accordingly, the focus of the EasyRights conference following the main conference was on reports from the practical work on the project and derived recommendations for policy and society, the importance of digital technologies for fundamental rights, and integration issues.

Migration – just as the research field dedicated to it – is in constant change and interplay with global developments and our handling of borders. Giving a scientific voice to the opportunities and challenges of migration is the goal of conferences like this. The Department for Migration and Globalisation at the University for Continuing Education Krems hopes that this year's conference on migration research in Austria has given further visibility to this complex research field and is pleased to have gained new insights from the multitude of participating experts and their work.