

# **Making linkages in migration research: “Migrants” and “mobile citizens” in the European Union**

**Martin Ruhs**

## **Abstract**

This chapter makes the case for more research on international migration that – as Gudrun Biffl’s work has done – links the theories and insights of different academic disciplines, connects migration with other relevant public policy issues, and takes account of the realities of public debates and policy-making. I argue that making these linkages – across disciplines, issue areas, and the theory/practice divide – can be an effective way of generating innovative analyses that contribute to academic research as well as inform migration debates and policies. To give an example from the European context, I suggest that we need much more analyses and debates that connect the “mobility” of EU citizens with the “migration” of people from outside the EU, two important policy issues that are often discussed in isolation from each other.

## **Introduction**

I am delighted and honoured to be given the opportunity to contribute to this *Festschrift* for Gudrun Biffl. Gudrun has developed a global reputation as one of Austria’s foremost experts on international migration and migration policies. She is also an excellent example of an international comparative migration researcher who has managed to connect her academic research to public debates and policy-making in and beyond Austria. Gudrun’s approach to migration research provides valuable lessons for researchers interested in making their work “impact” on debates and policy-making processes beyond academia.

This chapter makes the case for more research on international migration that – as Gudrun’s work has done – links the theories and insights of different academic disciplines, connects migration with other relevant public policy issues, and takes account of realities of public debate and policy-making. I argue that making these linkages – across disciplines, issue areas, and theory/practice – can be an effective way of generating innovative analyses that contribute to academic research and knowledge as well as inform migration debates and policy-making.

The chapter is structured as follows. I begin with a brief discussion of what the wide-spread, and possibly growing, scepticism about the “use” of researchers and

experts in public policy debates might mean for migration research and researchers. Next, I explain why and how making links across academic disciplines, issue areas, and the common divide between “theory” and “practices” of policy-making can help advance academic research as well as inform public debates and policy-making. The fourth section then looks at a specific issue that Gudrun has analysed extensively over many years, namely, the effects and regulation of “mobility” (of EU workers) and “migration” (of “third-country nationals”) in the European Union (EU).

As an example of the importance of “making linkages” in research and policy debates, I argue that we need much more analyses and debates that connect the “free movement” of EU citizens with “immigration policies” toward people from outside Europe. This is exactly the opposite approach to the one traditionally taken and advocated by the European Commission and many other European policy-makers who have insisted on a clear distinction between the “mobility” of EU citizens on the one hand, and the “immigration” of third-country nationals on the other.

### **Migration research, researchers and “post-truth politics”**

Social science research on the processes, determinants, and effects of international migration and migration policies has grown rapidly over the past few decades as evidenced, for example, by the rapidly rising numbers of academic publications on this topic (see, for example, IOM 2017). Economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians, legal scholars and others have all made important contributions to what we know – and, equally importantly, highlighted what we don’t know – about international migration, integration and the associated policy challenges for high- and lower-income countries. In recent years some of this growing academic research on migration has become much more accessible to people outside academia (without easy access to academic journal articles). As a result, the “evidence-base” available to politicians, policymakers, civil society, journalists and others working on migration and integration has vastly improved in most high-income countries.

More and better research does not mean, of course, that public debates and policy-making have generally become more “evidence-based”. The links between research, public debates and policy-making on migration and integration can be highly politicised (e.g. Boswell 2012), shaped by institutional structures (such as the characteristics of policy-making processes, e.g. Scholten et al 2015), and variable both across countries and over time (e.g. Ruhs, Palme & Tamas 2018). Furthermore, we know from existing research that public opinion on migration and refugees can be shaped by a range of different factors that have little to do with “facts”, “data” and “evidence” (e.g. Blinder 2011; OECD 2010). Similarly, policy-making on migration can be influenced by a wide range of interests, institutions and ideas which may or may not be based on the realities of the scale, processes, causes and effects of migration (e.g. Hampshire 2013; Boswell et al 2011). Given

these complex inter-relationships and multiple determinants of public opinion and public policies, the much lamented “disconnect” between migration policy debates and migration “realities” is neither new nor particularly surprising.

What *is* relatively new and perhaps more surprising is the apparent increase in scepticism about evidence and “experts” in public policy debates, at least in some countries. The two most prominent examples are the debates around the UK’s referendum to leave the European Union in June 2016 and the presidential elections in the United States in Nov 2016. Immigration was a key issue in the run-up to both events. In the UK, high profile figures of the campaign to leave the European Union (“Vote Leave”) openly and explicitly rejected the role and usefulness of “experts” in public policy debates and policy-making. In early June 2016, Michael Gove, a Conservative Cabinet Minister at the time, declared that *“people in this country have had enough of experts”* (Gove later clarified that he specifically meant economists) and Gisela Stuart, a Labour MP and Vote Leave campaigner, argued that *“there is only one expert that matters, and that’s you, the voter.”* (Deacon 2016). At the same time, the rise of Donald Trump in the US was accompanied by an apparent increase of a similar scepticism about the role, motivations and usefulness of so-called “experts” in public debates and policy-making. *The Economist* (2016) recently called Trump a *“leading exponent of ‘post-truth’ politics – a reliance on assertions that ‘feel true’ but have no basis in fact.”*

How should social scientists who work on migration and want their research to inform public policy debates respond to these developments? Part of the answer is to study and try to understand better the dynamics and processes of public debates and policy-making, the politicisation and (mis)use of “facts” and “evidence”, and the economic, social, political and other drivers of the apparent rise of “post-truth politics”. Continuing efforts to make the findings and insights of existing research more accessible to the wider public and policy-makers is obviously also important. However, I argue that a large part of the response should also include critical (self-)reflection and analysis of the characteristics of the rapidly growing academic research on migration and integration, especially with regard to its ability to capture and analyse real world policy challenges. Of course, there is an important role for research that has no immediate practical “use” or policy-relevance whatsoever (see, for example, Bakewell’s 2008 discussion of the importance of policy-irrelevant research into forced migration). At the same time, if one of the goals of the research is to inform migration debates and policies outside academia, it is critically important to think carefully about the multiple ways in which the design and characteristics of different types of research projects are likely to relate to their wider societal impacts. In particular, it is of critical importance to avoid disciplinary and analytical silos that prevent us from identifying and analysing important inter-linkages that, in my view, are of fundamental importance to a comprehensive analysis of public policies.

## **Making linkages in research on international migration and public policies**

Much of Gudrun's work on international labour migration and labour immigration policies is characterised by three key analytical "linkages" which are of fundamental importance to efforts to make social science research relevant to wider public and policy debates. The first of these linkages relates to connections *across social science disciplines*. To state the obvious, international migration is an inherently multi-disciplinary issue that cannot be analysed comprehensively from the perspective and within the boundaries of one discipline alone. Disciplinary contributions are clearly important – indeed they are often the pre-condition for multi-disciplinary work – but public policy analysis requires awareness and, ideally, integration of insights from various relevant disciplines. Most of Gudrun's work is based on economics but it frequently engages with theories and insights of other disciplines such as politics and law (e.g. Biffl 2011; and Biffl & Rössl 2011).

A second key linkage that is characteristic of Gudrun's work relates to the *connections between migration and a wide range of other public policy issues*. For example, in the sphere of labour immigration, it is clear that employer demand for migrant labour is critically influenced by the institutional and regulatory framework of the labour market as well as wider public policies such as education and training policies, welfare policies, housing policies, etc. (Anderson & Ruhs 2010). This is why the economics and politics of specific labour immigration policies cannot be fully understood, and should not be analysed, without considering the connections with other public policies. By making these linkages, Gudrun's work on labour migration (e.g. Biffl & Skrivanek 2016) is an example of what is now an active and growing research literature on the relationships between immigration, immigration policies and a range of national institutions and wider public policies (see e.g. Afonso & Devitt, 2016; Menz 2009).

A third important linkage relates to the connection between migration research and "policy practices". It is hard to analyse real world policy processes without an understanding and at least some direct experience (at least as an observer) of how these processes (including the numerous and multifaceted pressures and constraints on policy-makers) play out in practice. In addition to her role as a university professor and researcher, Gudrun has engaged extensively with policy debates and policy-making processes (e.g. in her long-standing role as Austria's migration correspondent at the OECD; and, most recently as a member of Austria's new "Migration Commission" which advises the government on immigration policies).

These three analytical connections – across disciplines, issue areas and theory/practice) – are, in my view, of critical importance in migration research that aims to be relevant to public debates and policy-making. There is no doubt that making these connections can be hard in practice, for a range of reasons including: the demands of keeping up with the research literature in more than one discipline; the difficulties with staying on top of policy developments across different issue

areas; and, last but not least, the variable degrees of (in)accessibility of policy-making processes to researchers, especially more junior researchers. In some countries, the incentive structures for academic researchers are (still) stacked against working across disciplines and engaging with policy-making processes. These are all real obstacles that need to be addressed by providing public policy researchers with an academic environment that clearly values inter-disciplinary research, facilitates engagement with public policies and, more generally, encourages research on migration and integration that considers the “bigger picture”.

### **Linking “migrants” and “mobile citizens” in the European Union**

The remainder of this chapter discusses research and policy debates on “migration” and “mobility” in the European Union. The EU has in recent years faced a number of major policy challenges, including on issues related to migration and mobility, that have led to highly divisive political debates among EU Member States. For example, Member States have been debating how to respond to the mass inflows of refugees and other migrants in recent years, whether and how to reform the rules for the free movement of workers within the EU as demanded by some EU countries (including but not only the UK before its referendum vote to leave the EU), and how to reform the rules for “posting workers” as part of the trade in services across EU member states (see Jongerius & Morin-Chartier 2017).

A key feature of these policy debates is the strict distinction that many people make between the effects and regulations of the mobility of EU workers (i.e. intra-EU labour mobility) and the immigration of third-country nationals. I argue that we need to connect debates about the “free movement” of EU citizens with discussions about “immigration policies” toward people from outside Europe.<sup>1</sup> To develop my argument, I first outline some of the key differences between how “migrants” and “mobile EU citizens” are debated and regulated in the European Union. This is followed by a brief explanation of why I think the current distinctions are problematic from moral, political, and research perspectives.

#### **“Migrants”**

There are very large differences between how EU member states currently treat “migrants” from outside Europe and “mobile EU citizens” from within Europe, in terms of both regulating their admission and rights after entry. In all countries, immigration is restricted through a range and often complex set of national admission policies that regulate the scale and selection of migrants. National immigration policies typically distinguish between high-skilled migrants (who face fewer

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion in this section draws on my recent blog post for the “European Union Democracy Observatory on Citizenship” at the European University Institute (EUI): “‘Migrants’, ‘mobile citizens’ and the borders of exclusion in the European Union” (Ruhs 2017b).

restrictions on admission), lower-skilled migrants (relatively more restrictions) as well as different rules for admitting family migrants, students, asylum seekers and refugees.

National immigration policies also place considerable restrictions on the rights of migrants after admission including their access to the labour market, welfare state, family reunion, permanent residence and citizenship. As it is the case with admission policies, rights restrictions typically vary between high- and low-skilled migrant workers (with the rights of lower-skilled migrant workers significantly more restricted) and across family migrants, students asylum seekers and refugees. As I have shown in my recent research (Ruhs 2013; Ruhs 2017), European and other high-income countries' immigration policies are often characterised by trade-offs between "openness" and some "migrant rights", that is, labour immigration programmes that are more open to admitting migrant workers are also more restrictive with regard to specific rights (especially social rights).

Public debates and policy-making on immigration vary across countries but they are typically framed in highly consequentialist terms, i.e. based on the (perceived and/or real) costs and benefits of particular admission policies and restrictions of migrants' rights for the host economy and society. This cost-benefit approach to policy-making has been a long-standing feature of labour immigration policies. Arguably, it is also becoming an important factor, and in some European countries *the* most important consideration, when it comes to policies towards asylum seekers and refugees (compare Bauböck & Tripkovic 2017). Some European countries' recent policies toward refugees and migrants fleeing conflicts and violence in Syria and other places are primarily shaped by the perceived impacts on the national interest of the host country rather than by humanitarian considerations, protection needs or respect for international refugee conventions.

A central feature of national migration policy debates in European and other high-income countries is the idea of "control" i.e. the idea that immigration and the rights of migrants can be controlled and regulated, at least to a considerable degree, based on the perceived costs and benefits for the existing residents of the host country. Of course, states' control over immigration is never complete and subject to a number of constraints but the idea of control is still at the heart of national immigration debates and policy-making. Arguably, the perceived "loss of control" over immigration has been a major driver of the rise of Donald Trump in the United States, Britain's referendum vote to leave the European Union, and the growing support for right-wing parties across various European countries (see e.g. Goodwin & Milazzo 2017).

### **"Mobile citizens"**

The policy framework for regulating the movement of EU citizens across member states, and their rights when residing in a member state other than their own, is very different from the restrictions imposed on people from outside the EU (or the European Economic Area [EEA], to be exact). The current rules for free movement give citizens of EU countries the right to move freely and take up employment in any other EU country and – as long as they are "workers" – the right to

full and equal access to the host country’s welfare state. This combination of unrestricted intra-EU mobility and equal access to national welfare states for EU workers is an important exception to the trade-off between immigration and access to social rights that characterises the labour immigration policies of many high-income countries. Free movement thus challenges long-standing theories and claims about the alleged incompatibility of open borders and inclusive welfare states (see, for example, Freeman 1986). Critically, while the idea of “control” is a central feature of debates and policies on the immigration of people from outside the EU, EU member states have effectively no direct control over the scale and characteristics of the inflows of EU workers. From the perspective of the EU, the overall aim has been to encourage rather than limit and control the mobility of EU citizens between different member states.

In terms of the European institutional framework, *free movement* is kept completely separate from the immigration of third-country nationals. While free movement is part of the remit of the “DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion” and “DG Justice”, policies for regulating immigration from outside Europe are largely dealt with by the “DG Migration and Home Affairs”. One of the consequences of this division has been that EU debates and policy aimed at the integration of migrants have been heavily focused on migrants from outside the EU.

A third distinction relates to the terminology used to describe and discuss the cross-border movement of EU citizens and non-EU citizens. Many European policy-makers insist that EU citizens moving from one member state to another are not “migrants” but “mobile EU citizens”. (Although I am critical of this distinction, for the sake of clarity I have stuck with this terminology in this chapter.) This distinction is not just a reflection of differences in policy approaches but also serves the purpose of framing public debates in a way that suggests that mobile EU citizens are very “different” from the (non-EU) outsiders whose migration needs to be carefully regulated and controlled.

### **Linking “migration” and “mobility”**

The distinctions made in the public debates and policies on “immigration” and “mobile EU citizens” raise a number of important ethical, political and research questions. First, insisting on near-equality of rights for mobile EU citizens while at the same time tolerating what are sometimes severe restrictions of the rights of migrants from outside the EU is, in my view, morally problematic. On the one hand, current policy insists on equality of rights for EU workers including, for example, equal access to non-contributory welfare benefits, i.e. benefits that are paid regardless of whether the beneficiary has made prior contributions or not. On the other hand, many EU member states are unwilling to admit and protect large numbers of refugees who are fleeing violence and conflict and/or grant them full access to the national welfare state. While a preference for protecting the interests and rights of “insiders” can of course be defended on moral grounds, I suggest that the magnitude of the discrepancy between how EU member states treat each other’s citizens vs some migrants from outside the EU should give us pause for criti-

cal reflection. I consider this an important area for research and analysis by, for example, political philosophers and theorists.

The disconnect between “mobile EU citizens” and “migrants” may also be politically problematic, in the sense that it potentially endangers (rather than protects, as is commonly argued) the future sustainability of the free movement of EU workers within the European Union as well as public support for immigration more generally. The inflow of “mobile EU citizens” in a particular member state has very similar types of effects, and raises very similar economic issues and tensions, as the immigration of migrants from outside the EU. As it is the case with “migrants”, “mobile EU citizens” affect the labour markets and welfare states of host countries in one way or another, creating costs and benefits for different groups. Insisting that “mobile citizens” are not “migrants” runs the danger of obscuring these impacts that mobile EU citizens have on the economies and societies of their host countries. This may, in turn, prevent, or at least discourage, important debates at European level about the consequences of free movement for EU citizens who do not move, and ultimately result in a decline in political support for the free movement of labour within the EU and perhaps also for immigration more generally.

A related third question relates to the potential inter-relationships between EU member states’ policies on immigration and mobility. How are our policies for the inclusion/exclusion of EU citizens related to our policies for the inclusion/exclusion of people from outside the EU? We know that past EU enlargements have in many member states led to more restrictive labour immigration policies for non EU-nationals, especially lower-skilled workers (see, for example, Zelano 2012). This may be a perfectly justifiable response within the sphere of labour immigration. The picture gets more complicated and problematic, however, if we consider the potential relationships between the free movement and equal treatment of EU *workers* and the highly regulated admission and restricted rights of *asylum seekers* and *refugees* from outside Europe. How, if at all, do the current policies for the inclusion of mobile EU citizens affect our policies for excluding/excluding asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants from outside Europe – and vice versa? These are open and important issues for future empirical research. Debates and research on migration and mobility in the European Union should engage explicitly with these wider questions and inter-relationships.

## Conclusion

Gudrun Biffel’s work is an excellent example of how academic research can inform public debates and policy-making on migration and integration. Successful engagement with public debates and policy-making requires an understanding of how and why research is (mis)used in public policy debates, and of when and how research conclusions get politicised. There are clearly complex inter-relationships between research, public debates and policy-making processes. As evidenced by the impact of her research outside academia, Gudrun has clearly thought a lot

about these issues and inter-relationships. Current and future scholars of migration and integration can learn a lot from Gudrun’s work, not only in terms of its substantive conclusions but also in terms of *how* her public policy research was approached and conducted.

Specifically, I have argued that making linkages – as Gudrun has frequently done in her work – across disciplines, issue areas, and the common divide between migration theory and policy practices should be an important strategy for future research on migration and integration, especially for research that explicitly aims to inform public debates and policy-making. To give an example from the European context, I have suggested that the interrelationships between “migrants” (from outside the EU) and “mobile workers” (from within the EU) should become a much more important question for migration research and policy debates than is currently the case. I don’t know if Gudrun agrees with this particular argument about linking migration and mobility in the EU but I hope to have identified correctly some of the key features of Gudrun’s applied research on international migration and integration. Current and future migration and public policy scholars have much to learn from it.

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