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Diaspora Politics and Conflict Processes in the European Neighborhood

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Migration from conflict regions has witnessed a drastic growth globally. [OECD data](#) show that migration flows have increased by almost 25% from 4 million to 5 million largely due to humanitarian migration in Europe, with a small decline in 2017, bouncing back in 2018 to approximately 5.3 million new permanent immigrants. While scholars and policy-makers have focused primarily on how to deal with the reception and integration of new migrants, less attention is paid to long-term trends affecting both European and other societies, namely how immigrants turn into diasporas over time and start exercising their own political influences transnationally on their homelands, and broader conflict zones they come from.

This policy memo builds on the European Research Council starting grant project [“Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty”](#) (which I directed as a Principal Investigator 2012-2017) and takes ideas and findings from my book [“Diaspora Entrepreneurs and Contested States,”](#) published by Oxford University Press (March 2021), to bring several policy-relevant points for knowledge exchange. First, when considering diasporas, policy-makers think of them primarily as agents of radicalization on the one side, or development on the other. Realities on the ground are much more nuanced, and one needs to better understand patterns and processes that can become the basis of a meaningful dialogue. Second, for much needed simplicity in policy-making processes (and also in academic statistical analysis), diasporas are often considered as monolithic blocks, as groups. Deeper research into conflict-generated diasporas, however, reveals the presence of four types of diaspora entrepreneurs, depending on their socio-spatial linkages to different global contexts and how they utilize them in their mobilizations. Third, when diasporas mobilize, they interact with a variety of forces that stem from host-lands, homelands or other global locations. In order to devise meaningful policy solutions and new mechanisms to engage diasporas constructively, more attention needs to be paid to the interactions between different types of diaspora entrepreneurs and such external forces.

Diasporas in Conflict Processes

Early 2000s studies brought attention to diasporas as rising non-state actors in world politics. The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, in 2001, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005 and continuing sporadic terrorist attacks in Europe (Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin in the 2010s) raised awareness and attached the label “home-grown” terrorism rightly or wrongly to the word “diaspora”. Individuals of foreign descent, born in or with long-term ties to a host-country, were considered to be a danger to security. [Influential policy-relevant studies](#) discussed links between diasporas and terrorism, mostly from the point of view of their radicalization.

Seeing diasporas as conflict-prone actors, an influential [World Bank quantitative study](#) and studies of individual case studies further showed that diasporas – even if not major agents of warfare – could sustain conflicts from afar, fundraise for radical factions, draw fighters from among their ranks, lobby foreign governments, and protest at distant locations. They can be linked to conflicts in weak and fragile states as diverse as Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Kurdish areas, Libya, Palestine, Somaliland, Sri Lanka, and Syria.

After Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2014) a variety of foreign fighters, some from the diaspora, have been implicated in the secessionist conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk. Some [Russian citizens](#) occupied senior positions among the rebels, while rank-and-file Russian fighters entered Ukraine to join them too. On their side, Ukrainians especially from Canada have raised private funds, provided supplies to troops and even arms for the front lines, [bypassing Ottawa official channels](#). More recently in 2019, Russia started [distributing passports to the populations](#) of these secessionist regions, thus solidifying annexation through demographic politics, while Ukraine expectedly argued it would not recognize such passports. In another example, the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1994) drew wide-ranging financing but only a few Armenian diaspora fighters, while the recent war (2020) has prompted mass mobilization in Armenia, and attracted diaspora volunteers. When conflicts get “hot,” diasporas become considered as “warmongers.”

Quite often and separate from the above picture are views painting diasporas as actors in development or even as “peace-makers.” Here scholars emphasize diaspora remittances that often constitute more than [13-20% of the GDP per capita](#) of a developing country, as for Armenia, Moldova and Tazjikistan. Diasporas also invest in enterprises and diaspora bonds, and get involved in philanthropic contributions, tourism, institution-building and the transfer of expertise, including [through hometown associations](#). Therefore, homeland governments want to [‘tap’ into the diasporas’ development potential](#). More rarely and when facing conflicts specifically, diasporas can be seen as [“peace-makers,”](#) as they could reframe conflict-generated identities and aid the brokering of peace-agreements alongside state agencies and international organizations. Diasporas can participate also from abroad in elections and referendums, thereby affecting transnationally the domestic politics of their countries of origin.

However, realities on the ground are much more nuanced than such dichotomous view. People from the same diaspora who participate in development could also become implicated in fund-raising for conflict processes when the country of origin experiences “hot” phases of conflict. Others may seek more peaceful solutions. The Ukrainian diaspora before and after Russia’s annexation of Crimea is a good case in point. While the Ukrainian diaspora was preoccupied with the state-building of Ukraine in the 1990s and with wider [democratization efforts in the 2000s](#), the geopolitical changes after 2014 drew the diaspora into new roles.

Criticism of the dichotomy of seeing diasporas as “warmongers” or “peacemakers” can be avoided if one thinks about diaspora mobilizations from a socio-spatial perspective, I argue. This means that diasporas build specific linkages to people in specific places that are more or less democratic, more or less conflict-driven, that in turn shape their behaviours domestically and transnationally.

While scholarship has recently advanced in making some of these distinctions, this memo appeals to policy-makers to consider thinking beyond such dichotomy. Despite some early initiatives (at the International Organization of Migration, World Bank and the US State Department) policy-making has still a blind spot for integrating diasporas in conflict prevention or resolution. EU

institutions prefer to deal with states and international organizations officially in track-one diplomacy (“high politics”) without engaging diasporas in a meaningful dialogue in track one, track two (“low politics”) or a combination of both. This could be done formally but also informally through new mechanisms to be designed to enable input from relevant diaspora agents whether on their own behalf (hence, incorporating rather than ignoring their potent agency that could create havoc otherwise) or of other relevant actors in the field. Diasporas’ peace-making potential can be utilized, if processes start becoming designed pro-actively to include such input from diasporas and by engaging different European institutions in a dialogue, currently split between agencies focused on: a) EU concerns for migration and home affairs, b) external action in foreign policy (with little consideration of diaspora agency), and c) social and political integration of migrants within the EU.

From Diaspora Groups to Individual Diaspora Entrepreneurs

Scholarship has identified that diasporas are not simply groups, although statistical analysis quite often still considers them as such. Constructivists have argued that diasporas belong to subgroups of [core, passive and silent members](#), and that such subgroups could be based on different generations, places of origin or ideological and religious orientations. Yet despite such broad understanding of the need to unpack diasporas beyond groups, until recently little efforts have been made to go deeper and theorize about individual diaspora agency (beyond thinking about terrorist “profiles,” definitely not suited for all active diaspora entrepreneurs that pursue political goals even towards contested states). A welcome exception is [Brinkerhoff’s](#) recent thinking about diaspora entrepreneurs from a leadership perspective, where she considers that diaspora entrepreneurs are either born or made as such through the migration experience.

My above-mentioned book takes this discussion further and goes beyond identifying specific traits of diaspora entrepreneurs. It develops a novel typology of four types of diaspora entrepreneurs – the Broker, Local, Distant and Reserved – depending on the relative strength of their socio-spatial

linkages to host-lands, on the one side, and homelands or other global locations, on the other. These linkages are important assets for how they will mobilize. Having strong linkages to both host-land and other global contexts, the Broker bridges ideas and resources that emerge from different locations. The Local, a proverbially well integrated migrant in host-state, is linked more strongly to that host-state, and finds ways to overcome barriers to access policy makers there. This person remains engaged transnationally only in minimal ways. The Distant is a counter-intuitive category, but quite spread especially among conflict-generated diasporas, as this person lives physically in a host-land but their emotional and personal connections are stronger elsewhere. These connections become also more easily transnationally mobilized. The Reserved is usually a community activist in the host-land, with relatively weak connections to both host-lands and homelands and other global locations, but becomes quite engaged in mobilizing others when they can do so autonomously, or are pressured by violent or other considerable events related to the homeland.

For example, Armenian diaspora entrepreneurs in Europe differ in how connected they are to different locations, and how they utilize their linkages to people in place for their political projects, Armenian genocide recognition and international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. A politician of Armenian origin, identified as a Broker, brought to the table both his political connections in Sweden and among Armenian political forces abroad. This helped him to influence international affairs by writing a bill about the recognition of the Armenian genocide. Another diaspora entrepreneur, a Local, has emigrated from Iran and lived in the Netherlands for much of his adult life. He had strong contacts with Dutch politicians and ambassadors in the Netherlands, but little with his country of origin, Iran. Therefore this person's central efforts have focused on lobbying the Dutch parliament and foreign ministry, regarding Armenian genocide recognition, and more rarely the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the first war in Karabakh, a Distant, who found that the political context of Germany did not allow him much access to policy-makers, was active almost exclusively transnationally. This person travelled to Karabakh on humanitarian trips during and after the first war altogether 52 times, bringing aid, some of it fund-raised also in the Netherlands. A Reserved, also in Germany, who came originally from Turkey, had weak ties with

that “homeland,” arguing her family was not in a good place, treated as an unwelcome minority. Yet beyond some links to German colleagues, this person had also no strong political connections to Germany either. The person nevertheless became quite engaged in mobilizing others, when calls were issued to support the commemoration of the 2015 centennial of the Armenian genocide.

These quick examples give food for thought to think beyond diasporas as groups, for academics but also for policy-makers. Because of not knowing how diaspora politics works, or because of being presented with diaspora voices that are the loudest but not the most substantial (usually Brokers), policy makers can choose the wrong people to collaborate with, given that they even become open to such collaboration. Ahmad Chalabi, who helped bring US policy makers into the 2003 military intervention in Iraq, is a good example, but not the only one. Feeling “burned” from such personalities, policy-makers become reluctant to engage diasporas unless they line up tightly with their short-term policy agendas and become [instrumentalized](#). My suggested unpacking of diaspora entrepreneurs into different types can offer opportunities to engage differently. In order to identify these types, my book suggests that one does not need to identify “profiles” of one’s fixed characteristics such as identity, gender, age, education, wealth or even psychological status, but to follow one’s socio-spatial linkages to different people in places globally and assess their relative strength and weakness and how one could interact through them with external forces.

Diaspora Entrepreneurs Interacting with External Forces

The picture of diaspora agency would not be complete unless we discuss how the different types of diaspora entrepreneurs interact with factors from a political environment that becomes relevant to them. In my above-mentioned book I present various ways in which diaspora entrepreneurs do so with host-land foreign policies (which could be divergent or convergent with their transnational political goals), and the influences that reach them from homeland governments, non-state actors (secessionist movements, radical or moderate groups), homeland-

based parties or critical events, such as violence, rigged elections, and others. Diaspora entrepreneurs can also operate with more autonomy, especially when they have more space to act during post-conflict reconstruction.

My first message in this rubric to policy-makers is that different homeland-based actors have different capacities for diaspora outreach. Conflict-ridden polities may put extraordinary effort to engage diasporas, as they have little alternative support from other states or international organizations. But some de facto states – such as Nagorno-Karabakh before the 2020 war – may have little capacity to do so either, relying instead on pre-mobilized diaspora entrepreneurs and organizations to carry their messages. These could be sidelined because the diaspora may have its own political agenda and would prioritize one political issue over another (genocide recognition rather than recognition of Karabakh in the Armenian case). Yet, connections to the diaspora during conflicts could also allow for some space for informal politics on issues of conflict prevention and resolution.

My second message is that homeland-based actors engage the four types of diaspora entrepreneurs differently. The Broker and Distant are much more accessible to homeland-based actors (governments, parties, non-state actors) especially during conflicts, because they have stronger linkages transnationally. Yet, the Local can become quite attractive for a homeland government when the acute violent phase is over, and when the de facto state would want to ramp up its efforts to acquire international recognition, and would need more rather than less integrated citizens in various host-lands across the globe, to carry their messages through public diplomacy. My book brings numerous such examples from the case of Kosovo after the proclamation of its independence in 2008.

Conclusions

Although a lot of attention is currently paid to migrants and refugees' reception and integration, policy-makers should be aware that the current migration "crises" are producing new waves of conflict-generated migrants in Europe and across the globe that will become diasporas in the future. These migrants will inevitably engage with their homelands and other places, because we live in a global world, however protective of national borders it may be becoming at present. The turning of migrants into diasporas is happening silently through the evolution of everyday lives, through long-term processes that remain in many aspects a blind spot for policy making. In my view, these would need to be addressed through new policy mechanisms.

On a final note, this policy note features a rare perspective based on the views of diaspora entrepreneurs from hard-to-reach populations in Europe. It differs from many other accounts about migration policies and governance considering migrants as subjects, instead emphasizing migrant agency. In order to formulate better policies for a more peaceful world, diaspora and migrant views need to be heard and engaged in a meaningful dialogue.