

Understanding migration power in international studies

IRENE FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA AND GERASIMOS TSOURAPAS*

The need to address an increasing number of migrant and refugee ‘crises’ globally has shed light on the important role that international labour and forced migration play in foreign policy and international affairs. From Ukraine to Venezuela, and from Syria to Palestine, we witness the extent to which both states and international organizations (IOs) have become invested in addressing cross-border mobility as they recognize both the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead of them. Scholarly approaches to the interplay between migrants, refugees and foreign policy tend to adopt the perspective of ‘migration diplomacy’, which prioritizes the role of states and expects them to behave in a power-maximizing manner within a broadly neo-realist construction of International Relations (IR). Yet, this literature has not so far engaged directly or thoroughly with the core IR concept of power and the full gamut through which migration and power interact in international politics and global North–South relations. Where and how does power operate in international migration governance?

In tackling this question, this article aims to pave the way for a more comprehensive picture of what we call ‘migration power’—one that includes the multiple forms of power in, through or against migration that operate in contemporary international politics. To that purpose, we map the explicit or implicit theoretical assumptions about power that are present in different strands of migration scholarship, and we apply to this field the canonical, pluralistic IR theorization of power proposed by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall.¹ We thus propose that migration power may be defined as the production, primarily by state-based actors, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities, interests and identities of other state and non-state actors that participate in international migration governance. We produce a framework of four types of migration power

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¹ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, *International Organization* 59: 1, 2005, pp. 39–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050010>.

that builds on the dominant conceptualization of migration diplomacy but takes it a step further in producing an arguably more nuanced and complete theoretical framework. We thereby show that migration power is complex and multidimensional, as it involves a combination of, and interaction between, compulsory power (through mechanisms such as deterrence and containment, political conditionality, and coercive engineered migrations), institutional power (through international regimes, regional organizations, bilateral cooperation institutions and diaspora mobilization), structural power (through funding, capacity-building and the attribution of migration state roles) and productive power (through crisis discourse and securitization/desecuritization, categorization, norm diffusion and contestation). Our taxonomy and identification of mechanisms are not intended to work as an explanatory theory, but as a contribution in terms of typological and middle-range theorizing,² with three main benefits. First, we argue that dissecting and mapping the multifaceted nature of migration power exposes that power in this sphere is diffuse, wielded by a wide range of actors, unevenly spread across its different dimensions and yet, at the same time, deeply asymmetrical in its distribution—along global North vs South as well as state vs non-state lines. Second, the typology helps distinguish the power-related causal conditions and ensuing effects upon actors of various migration governance mechanisms. Third, beyond academia, the recognition of this complexity can encourage more ‘reflexivity in policy processes’,³ and more sensitivity among practitioners.

In this article, we substantiate and illustrate the potential of this framework by drawing on secondary literature on the politics and governance of international migration. We focus on states as actors exercising migration power and on the migration governance approaches and policies prevailing since the post-Cold War era, though that neither pre-empts future analyses that foreground the role of non-state actors and migrants themselves, nor works to historicize the concept and typology of migration power. We adopt the following structure. We retrace the development of the scholarly conversation between migration studies and IR, focusing particularly on the importance of the migration diplomacy framework. We note four concrete limitations to existing approaches and introduce, in turn, our conceptualization and fourfold taxonomy of migration power: compulsory, institutional, structural and productive. We further expand this by identifying the prevailing causal mechanisms for each type of migration power, illustrating them through a range of examples.

Migration and IR in conversation

Early work by Aristide Zolberg and Myron Weiner examined how migration interacted with state power and interstate power relations in the context of the

² Andrew Bennett, ‘The mother of all isms: causal mechanisms and structured pluralism in International Relations theory’, *European Journal of International Relations* 19: 3, 2013, pp. 459–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113495484>.

³ Peter Scholten, ‘Mainstreaming versus alienation: conceptualizing the role of complexity in migration and diversity policymaking’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46: 1, 2020, pp. 108–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1625758>.

Cold War.⁴ Writing in 1984, Michael Teitelbaum argued that refugee movements, in particular, were becoming an ‘increasingly dangerous game’ in foreign policy-making, noting the extent to which realist IR approaches had already found their way into research on the international politics of migration.⁵ Even political scientists embedded in the liberal side of international relations were discussing migration in terms that spoke to neo-realist understandings of power.⁶ However, the focus of this first wave of scholarship did not strengthen debates in IR via bringing in insights on cross-border mobility, but the exact opposite. It moved the migration literature beyond structuralist accounts of push/pull factors that dominated it by employing international relations insights.

The end of the Cold War shifted scholars’ attention to primarily domestic matters of immigration, integration and citizenship. This obscured the continuing linkages between migration and foreign policy somewhat, only for them to resurface in the aftermath of 9/11 when immigration and interstate power dynamics were increasingly analysed via a security studies framework.⁷ In this context, the importance of asymmetrical relations entered the picture primarily through early work on coercion, as Kelly Greenhill explored how engineered migration crises may become instrumentalized as a form of force or threat.⁸ At the same time, scholars would also note that the exercise of power involves migration not merely for coercive or security purposes, but also as a means to support more liberal endeavours such as regional integration in the Arab world⁹ and Turkey’s processes of Europeanization.¹⁰ This tension is best exemplified in James Hollifield’s concluding thoughts in a 2012 piece on migration and international relations: ‘Will this increase in migration be a virtuous or a vicious cycle? Will it be destabilizing, leading the international system into greater anarchy, disorder, and war, or will it lead to greater openness, wealth, and human development?’¹¹

By the mid-2010s the field was well aware of how migration affects and, in turn, is affected by processes of interstate diplomacy, including diverse forms of linkage

⁴ Myron Weiner, ‘On international migration and international relations’, *Population and Development Review* 11: 3, 1985, pp. 441–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1973247>; Aristide R. Zolberg, ‘International migrations in political perspective’, in Mary M. Kritz, Charles B. Keely and Silvano M. Tomas, eds, *Global trends in migration: theory and research on international population movements* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1981), pp. 3–27.

⁵ Michael S. Teitelbaum, ‘Immigration, refugees, and foreign policy’, *International Organization* 38: 3, 1984, pp. 429–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300026801>.

⁶ James F. Hollifield, ‘Migration and International Relations: cooperation and control in the European Community’, *International Migration Review* 26: 2, 1992, pp. 568–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791839202600220>.

⁷ Christopher Rudolph, ‘Security and the political economy of international migration’, *American Political Science Review* 97: 4, 2003, pp. 603–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540300090X>; Fiona B. Adamson, ‘Crossing borders: international migration and national security’, *International Security* 31: 1, 2006, pp. 165–99, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.165>.

⁸ Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of mass migration: forced displacement, coercion, and foreign policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁹ Hélène Thiollet, ‘Migration as diplomacy: labor migrants, refugees, and Arab regional politics in the oil-rich countries’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 79, 2011, pp. 103–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000293>.

¹⁰ Ahmet İçduygu and Damla B. Aksel, ‘Two-to-tango in migration diplomacy: negotiating Readmission Agreement between the EU and Turkey’, *European Journal of Migration and Law* 16: 3, 2014, pp. 337–63, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12342060>.

¹¹ James F. Hollifield, ‘Migration and International Relations’, in Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor, eds, *The Oxford handbook of the politics of international migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 345–82.

and varied attempts at asserting influence. Work on power and migration in colonial/postcolonial contexts,¹² in European Union member states' relations with peripheral states,¹³ in South–South migration,¹⁴ in the global refugee regime,¹⁵ and in state–diaspora relations,¹⁶ all espoused elements of realist thinking, although these were not explicitly theorized as such, nor did they attempt to enter into a debate with each other for theory-building purposes.

Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas' 2019 article on migration diplomacy in world politics aimed to move theory-building forward via a largely neo-realist take that placed states (structurally categorized as migrant-sending, transit or host) at the centre of analysis and examined processes of issue-linkage and bargaining strategies in terms of zero-sum and positive-sum strategies.¹⁷ Since then, a number of scholars have advanced research on the interplay between migration, power and diplomacy, drawing on the article's neo-realist underpinnings either explicitly¹⁸ or implicitly.¹⁹ The authors themselves have produced further work on 'people power', which continues to employ a neo-realist take,²⁰ as well as on refugee rentier strategies of blackmailing and backscratching,²¹ where the dichotomy between coercion and cooperation remains central. In this line of thinking, structural global North–South inequalities and asymmetries are placed at the forefront of the analysis, in sharp contrast to earlier attempts to downplay such power differentials or to solely examine them through a Cold War lens. Now, migration allows 'weaker' states to exercise agency and power within bilateral and multi-lateral negotiations, be it in labour migration contexts,²² or the management of asylum-seekers and forced displacement.²³

¹² Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, eds, *Mobility makes states: migration and power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹³ Emanuela Paoletti, *The migration of power and North–South inequalities: the case of Italy and Libya* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁴ Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in the global South: cooperation, coercion and issue linkage in Gaddafi's Libya', *Third World Quarterly* 38: 10, 2017, pp. 2367–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350102>.

¹⁵ James Milner and Krystyna Wojnarowicz, 'Power in the global refugee regime: understanding expressions and experiences of power in global and local contexts', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33: 1, 2017, pp. 7–17, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40444>.

¹⁶ Alan Gamlen, 'The emigration state and the modern geopolitical imagination', *Political Geography* 27: 8, 2008, pp. 840–56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.10.004>.

¹⁷ Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in world politics', *International Studies Perspectives* 20: 2, 2019, pp. 113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015>.

¹⁸ Philippe M. Frowd, 'Producing the "transit" migration state: international security intervention in Niger', *Third World Quarterly* 41: 2, 2020, pp. 340–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1660633>; Kelsey P. Norman, 'Migration diplomacy and policy liberalization in Morocco and Turkey', *International Migration Review* 54: 4, 2020, pp. 1158–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319895271>.

¹⁹ Shoshana Fine, 'Symbolic rewards as migration diplomacy: crisis and containment in EU–Turkey migration cooperation', *American Behavioral Scientist*, publ. online 5 July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231183271>; Ayca Arkilic, *Diaspora diplomacy: the politics of Turkish emigration to Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

²⁰ Fiona B. Adamson and Kelly M. Greenhill, 'Deal-making, diplomacy and transactional forced migration', *International Affairs* 99: 2, 2023, pp. 707–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaiad017>.

²¹ Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'The Syrian refugee crisis and foreign policy decision-making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4: 4, 2019, pp. 464–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz016>.

²² Froilan T. Malit, Jr, and Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in the Gulf: non-state actors, cross-border mobility, and the United Arab Emirates', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47: 11, 2021, pp. 2556–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1878875>.

²³ Arne Niemann and Natascha Zaun, 'Introduction: EU external migration policy and EU migration

However, thinking critically through current scholarship on the interplay between migration and power in world politics reveals that, despite its strengths, the neo-realist paradigm of migration diplomacy has four concrete limitations.²⁴ First, it does not theoretically tackle or tease out its assumptions about what is generally viewed as the central concept in IR, that is, power. Second, the perspective tends to be actor- and state-centric, focusing on direct and specific interactions, and thus pushes into the background discussion of the institutional and regulative fabric of (power in) migration politics. How can we then make sense, for instance, of the mediating role and relative autonomy of United Nations agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in shaping migration governance between Australia and Indonesia,²⁵ in the outer periphery of the European Union²⁶ and elsewhere? Or of the strength of the European Convention on Human Rights in hindering the implementation of international migration deals such as the 2022 United Kingdom–Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership, which sought to deport asylum seekers from the former to the latter country?²⁷

Third, existing work has yet to take into account the structural power generated through material and technical capacity-building. How can we account for the political, economic and social effects of supposedly depoliticized international programmes of institutional development and training that seek to prevent irregular migration at source or in transit countries, for example in regions such as south-east Asia and west Africa?²⁸ Finally, we lack an adequate understanding of the share of international migration power exercised through knowledge and discourse, or any critical take on the importance—and arbitrariness—of categorization. How can we do theoretical justice to the effects of the waves of desecuritization and resecuritization of migrants and refugees in South America?²⁹ And what about the ‘soft power’ considerations involved in the EU’s early visa and temporary protection policies towards refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine?³⁰

governance’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49: 12, 2023, pp. 2965–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193710>.

²⁴ See Juliette Tolay, ‘Interrogating and broadening the emerging narrative on migration diplomacy: a critical assessment’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 51: 1, 2022, pp. 354–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298221139589>.

²⁵ Asher Lazarus Hirsch and Cameron Doig, ‘Outsourcing control: the International Organization for Migration in Indonesia’, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22: 5, 2018, pp. 681–708, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1417261>.

²⁶ Inken Bartels, *The International Organization for Migration in North Africa: making international migration management* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022); Antoine Pécoud, ‘What do we know about the International Organization for Migration?’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44: 10, 2018, pp. 1621–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1354028>.

²⁷ The so-called Rwanda plan was cancelled by the UK’s new Labour government in July 2024.

²⁸ Corey Robinson, ‘Offshoring and outsourcing anti-smuggling policy: capacity building and the geopolitics of migrant smuggling’, *Geopolitics* 29: 1, 2024, pp. 13–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2159385>; Leonie Felicitas Jegen, ‘“Migratizing” mobility: coloniality of knowledge and externally funded migration capacity building projects in Niger’, *Geoforum*, vol. 146, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103862>.

²⁹ Gabriela Patricia García García, ‘“We opened the door [too] much”: the challenging desecuritisation of Colombian refugees in Ecuador’, *European Journal of International Security*, publ. online 21 Feb. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.7>.

³⁰ Matilde Rosina, ‘Migration and soft power: the EU’s visa and refugee policy response to the war in Ukraine’, *Policy Studies* 45: 3–4, 2024, pp. 532–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2288237>.

Dissecting and mapping migration power

This article applies and extends Barnett and Duvall's conceptualization and taxonomy of power with the aim of theoretically unpacking the multiple forms of power that are mobilized in international migration politics and, more specifically, in global North–South relations in this domain. Power is widely considered to be the central or ‘defining’ concept of IR as a discipline, and yet it is one that seems to be notoriously slippery and poorly defined. The longer the list of adjectives attached to it—such as hard, soft, smart, sharp, network, social, ideational and symbolic power—the thinner the consensus on its core definitional features.³¹ This also creates blind spots in empirical research. As argued by Stefano Guzzini, ‘faced with the difficulties of pinning down a concept, scholars decide to go for its more easily operationalizable aspects, but they thereby incur the risk of neglecting its most significant aspects’.³² For the purpose of our article, while not totally solving the definitional difficulties, Barnett and Duvall offer a sound and parsimonious theoretical basis for mapping and holistically bridging disparate conceptions of power from rival IR theoretical schools and approaches in migration studies.³³

We therefore define migration power as the production, primarily by state-based actors, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities, interests and identities of other state and non-state actors, including migrants, that participate in international migration governance. We understand relations broadly as nexus or ties of any type linking two or more individual phenomena, entities or persons. These are the ‘processes of social transaction’³⁴ inherent to any collectivity. Starting from their essential in-betweenness, a common philosophical distinction is made between relations that are external vs internal to phenomena, and ontologically posterior vs prior to substance.³⁵ The relational IR perspective contributes to a better understanding of migration power by foregrounding ‘regularly repeated social interactions’ and ‘power-laden relationships’ between and among all sorts of actors, rather than limiting the picture to just the formal migration governance institutions.³⁶ Simply put, ‘power comes from relations’.³⁷

Following this approach as well as Barnett and Duvall,³⁸ we distinguish between four types of migration power (compulsory, institutional, structural and productive) based on the intersection between two relational dimensions: first, the nature

³¹ Daniel Drezner, ‘Power and International Relations: a temporal view’, *European Journal of International Relations* 27: 1, 2021, pp. 29–52 at pp. 30–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120969800>.

³² Stefano Guzzini, ‘The concept of power: a constructivist analysis’, *Millennium* 33: 3, 2005, pp. 495–521 at p. 502, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031301>.

³³ Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’.

³⁴ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Relations before states: substance, process and the study of world politics’, *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 3, 1999, pp. 291–332 at p. 291, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005003002>.

³⁵ On the contrast between substantialism and relationalism in International Relations, see Jackson and Nexon, ‘Relations before states’.

³⁶ Maria Koinova, ‘Polycentric governance of transit migration: a relational perspective from the Balkans and the Middle East’, *Review of International Studies* 48: 3, 2022, pp. 461–83 at p. 462, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000693>.

³⁷ Yaqing Qin, *A relational theory of world politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 259.

³⁸ Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, pp. 45–8.

of the social relations underpinning power, which may be either of interaction (relations between pre-constituted actors) or of constitution (relations preceding and establishing actorness); and second, the specificity of such social relations, which range from direct to more diffuse. Importantly, these four types of power are not mutually exclusive, but complementary and overlapping in many instances. As a second step to address the ‘how’ question, we expand the typology through another recognized strategy of middle-range theorizing:³⁹ identifying causal mechanisms, that is, the prevailing pathways or processes whereby the effects of each type of migration power are produced nowadays.⁴⁰

Table 1: Taxonomy and mechanisms of migration power

		<i>Relational specificity</i>	
		<i>Direct</i>	<i>Diffuse</i>
<i>Power works through</i>	<i>Social relations of interaction</i>	Compulsory migration power	Institutional migration power
		Mechanisms: —Deterrence —Containment —Political conditionality —Coercive engineered migrations	Mechanisms: —Cooperation in/through international regimes —Cooperation in/through regional organizations —Cooperation in/through bilateral institutions —Diaspora mobilization
	<i>Social relations of constitution</i>	Structural migration power	Productive migration power
		Mechanisms: —Funding —Capacity-building —Attribution of migration state roles	Mechanisms: —Crisis discourse and (de)securitization —Categorization —Norm diffusion and contestation

Source: Authors, based on Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’.

When it comes to the ‘where’ question, our relational approach entails locating power in the ties between actors. As the literature on complexity in migration governance underlines, power in this realm is embedded in ‘complex interde-

³⁹ Bennett, ‘The mother of all isms’.

⁴⁰ John Gerring, ‘The mechanistic worldview: thinking inside the box’, *British Journal of Political Science* 38: 1, 2008, pp. 161–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000082>. See Koinova, ‘Polycentric governance’, pp. 467–8.

pendencies' and 'complex actor networks with diffuse roles and positions'.⁴¹ The multiplicity of participating actors may be divided, based on their sovereignty-related attributes, into four broad categories: states (acting as migration sending, transit or destination countries, and operating at various territorial governance levels), inter- and supranational organizations (of regional or universal scope), non-state actors (including NGOs, smuggling and trafficking groups, and private companies), and individuals such as the migrants and refugees themselves (as well as other involved citizens). At the same time, the diffusion of migration power does not preclude a deeply imbalanced distribution along two intersecting lines. On the state vs non-state axis, typically, the primary power wielders are, or act on behalf of, states and IOs, while migrants and most non-state actors tend to be their targets. On the global North vs South axis, power disproportionately lies with actors of all kinds based in the former. Finally, regarding effects, different types and mechanisms of migration power may modify their recipients' attitudes and behaviour by influencing their material capacities (containment, funding, capacity-building), interests (deterrence, conditionality, coercive engineered migrations, all forms of institutional power) and identities (attribution of migration state roles, all forms of productive power).

Compulsory migration power

Compulsory migration power involves social relations of interaction of a direct and specific nature. It may therefore be defined as 'direct control of one actor over the conditions of existence and/or the actions of another'.⁴² The relations underpinning it are generally characterized by the involved actors' conflicting goals or preferences, and by one actor's intentionality and capacity to alter another's behaviour through the mobilization of primarily material resources. Prioritized by the neo-realist paradigm of migration diplomacy discussed above, as well as by critical border studies, compulsory migration power nowadays operates through four main mechanisms: deterrence, containment, political conditionality and coercive engineered migrations. In the first three cases, power is predominantly the preserve of global North and destination states—especially when these two categories overlap—but is also diffused upward and downward, to IOs as well as state and non-state actors from transit countries in the global South. By contrast, it is global South states that tend to resort to coercive engineered migrations.

Migration deterrence and containment are two very straightforward mechanisms as far as control of the recipient's behaviour is concerned. Increasingly widespread in the discourse on international migration governance, the verb 'to deter' 'literally means to stop someone from doing something by frightening [them]'.⁴³ In addition to direct control, the commonly accepted definitional features of deterrence include a rational cost–benefit calculation as well as anticipation and preven-

⁴¹ Scholten, 'Mainstreaming versus alienation', pp. 118–19.

⁴² Barnett and Duvall, 'Power in international politics', p. 48.

⁴³ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The spread of nuclear weapons: a debate renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 5.

tion of both the undesired behaviour and the threatened punishment.⁴⁴ The recipient of deterrence is meant to perceive and be dissuaded by ‘a prospect of cost and risk outweighing [their] prospective gain’.⁴⁵ Consequently, if successful, the deterring actor exercises compulsory power without taking any forceful action.⁴⁶ This means that an essential conceptual distinction must be made between what Glenn Snyder originally called deterrence and defence: the former seeks to alter the recipient’s motivations and decision-making while the latter—which we refer to here as (migration) containment—focuses on limiting its capabilities to execute the unwanted action.⁴⁷

What both deterrence and containment share is a direct relationship between wielders of state power and the individuals (i.e. the potential migrants) who are their primary recipients, which entails a vastly greater power asymmetry and qualitatively different legal and moral implications than found in state–state or state–IO relations. Moreover, none of these mechanisms of compulsory power would have reason to exist without the securitization and criminalization of irregular migration (discussed below). Indeed, the very notion of deterrence remains marked by its association with the two fields where it first emerged: military strategy, with a particular focus on nuclear weapons during the Cold War, and the modern criminal justice system. Finally, though Jonathan Kent, Kelsey Norman and Katherine Tennis are persuasive in their argument for drawing a sharper conceptual line between deterrence and containment in order to avoid ‘whitewashing’ ‘physically brutal’ militarized policies,⁴⁸ the reality is that there is a substantial overlap. A range of migration-control policies pursue containment as their immediate goal but also seek or invoke deterrence as an expected knock-on effect—for example, assuming that the perceived probabilities of interception and repatriation will influence decisions to migrate irregularly⁴⁹—to such an extent that the two repertoires of practices cannot be fully disentangled. These include intraterritorial, borderline and extraterritorial access restrictions and obstacles which are tellingly visualized in David FitzGerald’s ‘architecture of repulsion’ from the global North: distant ‘cages’, ‘moats’ in international waters, land ‘buffers’, legal ‘barbicans’, border ‘walls’ and administrative ‘files’.⁵⁰ Another example of the intertwining between deterrence and containment concerns the increasing European deployment of military operations to curb irregular migration in the Mediterranean. The ensuing push to categorize this phenomenon as a

⁴⁴ Charis Anastasopoulos, ‘Linking the deterrence concept to migration’, in Anastasia Filippidou, ed., *Deterrence: concepts and approaches for current and emerging threats* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), pp. 157–76 at p. 158.

⁴⁵ Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 3.

⁴⁶ Glenn H. Snyder, ‘Deterrence and power’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4: 2, 1960, p. 163–78.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Kent, Kelsey P. Norman and Katherine H. Tennis, ‘Changing motivations or capabilities? Migration deterrence in the global context’, *International Studies Review* 22: 4, 2020, pp. 853–78 at p. 854, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz050>.

⁴⁸ Kent, Norman and Tennis, ‘Changing motivations or capabilities?’, p. 859.

⁴⁹ Dirk Godenau and Ana López-Sala, ‘Multi-layered migration deterrence and technology in Spanish maritime border management’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 31: 2, 2016, pp. 151–69 at p. 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1174602>.

⁵⁰ David Scott FitzGerald, ‘Remote control of migration: theorizing territoriality, shared coercion, and deterrence’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46: 1, 2020, pp. 4–22 at p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1680115>.

‘hybrid threat’ in documents such as NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept⁵¹ is justified by the first of this alliance’s core tasks—deterrence and defence.

For its part, the mechanism of *political conditionality* traces its origins back to the field of foreign aid and the post–Cold War period, a context in which it was defined as ‘the use of pressure, by the donor government, in terms of threatening to terminate aid, or actually terminating or reducing it, if conditions are not met by the recipient’.⁵² The concept then substantially expanded in terms of measures (positive and negative, *ex ante* and *ex post*), international cooperation areas used as leverage beyond aid, and the policy objectives or reforms demanded from recipients,⁵³ to include notably less normative agendas such as international migration control. Overall, political conditionality represents another direct and relationally specific (i.e., compulsory) mechanism of power that, similarly to migration deterrence and containment, relies on the assumption of the recipient’s rational choice and the logic of consequences.⁵⁴ On the other hand, unlike in the two cases above, here compulsory power is exercised through issue-linkage and a state–state relationship. The targets are primarily states and their ruling elites, and only secondarily regular migrants.

A prominent example of migration conditionality lies in the global North states’ use of the so-called ‘visa lever’ as both a ‘carrot’ (visa facilitation) and a ‘stick’ (visa sanctions) to incentivize greater cooperation of countries of origin in migrant deportation and repatriation. The most extreme version of the stick approach is the US Department of Homeland Security’s list of ‘recalcitrant’ or ‘uncooperative’ countries, as per a regularly updated ranking, which are subject to the discontinuation or restriction of visa issuance (for certain categories of applicants) by the State Department.⁵⁵ The administration of Donald Trump made an unprecedented use of this tool, including for countries such as Cambodia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Laos, Myanmar and Sierra Leone. France implemented a similar measure against Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia between 2021 and 2022, albeit less effectively.⁵⁶ In the case of the EU, the approach to conditionality has been much broader, and has focused on candidate and neighbouring countries. Over the past 25 years, migration conditionality has been an integral part of the EU’s enlargement policy (where the prospect of membership acted as a powerful positive incentive for third states to adopt stricter control standards). It has also been central to bilateral association agreements such as those concluded within

⁵¹ Müge Kinacioglu, ‘Militarized governance of migration in the Mediterranean’, *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2423–41 at pp. 2425–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad232>.

⁵² Olav Stokke, ed., *Aid and political conditionality* (Abingdon and New York: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 12.

⁵³ Svea Koch, ‘A typology of political conditionality beyond aid: conceptual horizons based on lessons from the European Union’, *World Development*, vol. 75, 2015, pp. 97–108 at pp. 98–9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.01.006>.

⁵⁴ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, ‘The institutional dynamics of international political orders’, *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 943–69, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550699>.

⁵⁵ See US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ‘Visa sanctions against multiple countries pursuant to section 243(d) of the Immigration and Nationality Act’, <https://www.ice.gov/remove/visa-sanctions>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 Aug. 2024).

⁵⁶ Victoria Rietig and Marie Walter-Franke, *Conditionality in migration cooperation: five ideas for future use beyond carrots, sticks, and delusions* (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (where each partner's development of relations with the EU became formally subject to its cooperation in 'joint management of migration flows', especially on the return and readmission of irregular migrants) and the post-2004 European Neighbourhood Policy, (the bilateral action plans of which were supposed to enhance the effectiveness of positive conditionality).⁵⁷

Finally, confronted with the global North states' and IOs' deterrence, containment and conditionality, the chief mechanism of compulsory migration power in the hands of sending and transit countries in the global South is that of *coercive engineered migrations*. Defined by Greenhill as 'those cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states', coercive engineered migrations are characterized by their 'strategic motivation' and the recipients' 'perception of coercive intent'.⁵⁸ They generally involve conflict of desires within a state-state relationship. The power wielder's methods need not be coercive *vis-à-vis* the individual migrants, who may move in response to the threat or use of force but also be positively incentivized or enabled by turning a blind eye at a normally closed border. The targets of coercion here are migration destination states which, according to Greenhill's dataset,⁵⁹ tend to be more powerful global North liberal democracies.⁶⁰

Institutional migration power

Institutional migration power consists of indirect control exercised over socially distant others through diffuse relations of interaction. While states remain the main power wielders and recipients, here their relations are mediated by formal and informal institutions that have some degree of autonomy from even the most dominant among them.⁶¹ Privileged by (neo-)liberal approaches to IR, international institutions may be defined as 'relatively stable sets of related constitutive, regulative, and procedural norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors in the system (including states as well as nonstate entities), and their activities'.⁶² Such normative and practical arrangements, which multiply with the rise of interdependencies, regional integration and global governance efforts, constrain or enable the actors' power through binding legal instruments, formal decision-making rules and procedures, informal negotiations, bureaucratic interests and divisions of labour, agenda setting and (de)legitimation processes. In

⁵⁷ Sandra Lavenex, 'Shifting up and out: the foreign policy of European immigration control', *West European Politics* 29: 2, 2006, pp. 329–50 at pp. 334–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380500512684>.

⁵⁸ Greenhill, *Weapons of mass migration*, pp. 13, 20.

⁵⁹ Greenhill, *Weapons of mass migration*, pp. 24–30.

⁶⁰ For a criticism of the liberal/illiberal dichotomy in this context, see Beste İşleyen and Sibel Karadağ, 'Engineered migration at the Greek-Turkish border: a spectacle of violence and humanitarian space', *Security Dialogue* 54: 5, 2023, pp. 475–92 at p. 478, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106231194911>.

⁶¹ Barnett and Duvall, 'Power in international politics', pp. 48, 51–2.

⁶² John Duffield, 'What are international institutions?', *International Studies Review* 9: 1, 2007, pp. 1–22 at pp. 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2007.00643.x>.

the sphere of international migration governance, institutions may intervene and shape power through mechanisms of cooperation on at least three levels: global, regional and bilateral.

At the global level, there is no single coherent international regime comprising all the ‘principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge’⁶³ in the area of international migration, just as there is no formal, comprehensive UN-based multilateral framework regulating state responses and cooperation on this matter.⁶⁴ Instead, we have a piecemeal combination of narrower regimes concerning refugees and forced migration (the most developed one), international travel and labour migration. The reach and binding force of the migration-specific instruments of international law is limited, except for the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. Altogether, these weaknesses make *cooperation in/through international regimes* often appear to be tailor-made for states, the primary wielders of institutional migration power. According to Alexander Betts, institutions can curb neither the states’ ability to act in their own self-interest nor the structural power asymmetries between migration destination and ending countries, both in global North–South relations and within various regions. Moreover, institutions may sometimes work as instruments of power for the most influential actors.⁶⁵ On the other hand, as Barnett and Duvall contend, ‘rare is the institution that is completely dominated by one actor’.⁶⁶ And for the less powerful actors, institutions facilitate (state) bargaining and issue-linkage strategies as well as (non-state) lobbying, which in some cases allow them to counter such an uneven playing field.

The second mechanism of institutional migration power is *cooperation in/through regional organizations*. This is particularly relevant to the power of the EU and its member states, due to the highly dense institutional fabric and the unique level of supranational integration achieved in this context. Still, what distinguishes this regional regime is the paradoxical contrast between the member states’ longstanding resistance to institutionally enhancing EU migration cooperation and regulation in its internal dimension—by transferring powers and submitting themselves to supranational institutions and law⁶⁷—and their growing eagerness to do this on the external front.⁶⁸ The EU’s external migration policy has been tremendously prolific in generating international institutions, including bilateral cooperation instruments with third countries (such as readmission agreements, mobility partnerships, special deals and compacts) and interregional coordination forums (e.g. the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development).⁶⁹

⁶³ Stephen D. Krasner, ‘Structural causes and regime consequences: regimes as intervening variables’, *International Organization* 36: 2, 1982, pp. 185–205 at p. 185, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300018920>.

⁶⁴ Bimal Ghosh, ed., *Managing migration: time for a new international regime?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵ Alexander Betts, ‘Introduction’ in Alexander Betts, ed., *Global migration governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 21–2.

⁶⁶ Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Lavenex, ‘Shifting up and out’, p. 338.

⁶⁸ Stefania Panebianco, ‘The EU and migration in the Mediterranean: EU borders’ control by proxy’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48: 6, 2022, pp. 1398–1416, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851468>.

⁶⁹ Niemann and Zaun, ‘Introduction’, p. 2967. See Sarah Wolff, ‘The politics of negotiating EU readmission

All of these overlapping structures multiply the institutional migration power of the EU institutions and member states, facilitating variable-geometry and selective cooperation with external partners without requiring any significant power concessions for the states themselves.

Beyond Europe, other regional organizations have also liberalized intraregional mobility to a greater (MERCOSUR, ECOWAS⁷⁰) or lesser (ASEAN, NAFTA⁷¹) extent, but have generally made little headway in enhancing migration policy coordination towards the outside and from a security angle. This external dimension of regional cooperation has been addressed instead in more informal consultation processes supported by global North states and the IOM, such as the Migration Dialogue for West Africa and the Bali Process in south-east Asia (co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia).⁷² This means that global South regional organizations add relatively little in terms of institutional migration power—for themselves and for their member states—towards the rest of the world. Moreover, in such contexts, regional migration governance arrangements may even become vehicles for the institutional power of the dominant global North actors.

At the level of relations within pairs of states, the mechanism of institutional migration power is *cooperation in/through bilateral institutions*, which ranges from legally binding treaties (e.g. on readmission or unaccompanied minors) to more informal schemes (e.g. for interministerial dialogue). Regarding the latter, it is important to bear in mind that migration-related interests and approaches tend to often diverge within the same state's administrative apparatus, as highlighted by bureaucratic politics research.⁷³ In particular, a typical institutional division of labour makes the agendas of interior and foreign affairs ministries align more closely with those of their respective foreign counterparts than with the preferences of other departments of their own governments. In another vein, bilateral relations are also the main context in which *diaspora mobilization* is deployed as an indirect mechanism for sending states to attempt to influence the foreign policies of destination states with the mediation of non-state actors (NGOs) and individual migrants: through more or less organized migrant engagement with their various institutions (lobbying), democratic participation therein, or communication to broader domestic audiences and public opinion (public diplomacy).⁷⁴

agreements: insights from Morocco and Turkey', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 16: 1, 2014, pp. 69–95, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-00002049>; Sandra Lavenex and Rachel Stucky, "Partnering" for migration in EU external relations', in Rahel Kunz, Sandra Lavenex and Marion Panizzon, eds, *Multilayered migration governance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 116–42.

⁷⁰ Acronyms refer to the Southern Common Market and the Economic Community of West African States.

⁷¹ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the North American Free Trade Agreement.

⁷² Sandra Lavenex, Flavia Jurje, Terri E. Givens and Ross Buchanan, 'Regional migration governance', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, eds, *The Oxford handbook of comparative regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 457–85.

⁷³ Katharina Natter, *The politics of immigration beyond liberal states: Morocco and Tunisia in comparative perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 28.

⁷⁴ See for example Maria Koinova, 'Four types of diaspora mobilization: Albanian diaspora activism for Kosovo independence in the US and the UK', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9: 4, 2013, pp. 433–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2012.00194.x>; Maria Koinova, 'Sending states and diaspora positionality in International Relations', *International Political Sociology* 12: 2, 2018, pp. 190–210, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly008>.

Structural migration power

Structural migration power relies on direct and specific social relations of a constitutive nature, which in the first place establish the recipient actors' capacities and interests.⁷⁵ This type of power is centred by structuralist materialist (e.g. Marxist) approaches to IR as well as the socio-material views from the international practice scholarship and role theory within the constructivist tradition. In international migration governance, this power is exercised through mechanisms such as funding and capacity-building, as well as the wider attribution of migration state roles. The relations at stake here link global North states and IOs, the principal power wielders, with various state and non-state actors in the global South, which are the usual power recipients yet become in turn relatively empowered, at least in terms of material capabilities.

When it comes to the direct constitution of capacities, the first mechanism of structural migration power—and the one privileged by global North actors—is *funding*. Examples range from what the United States and Mexico in 2018 dubbed a 'Marshall Plan' for central America—a commitment to boost US development assistance and investment in those countries with the aim of addressing the root causes of northbound migration—to Australia's provision of around two-thirds of Nauru's state revenue since the reintroduction of the 'Pacific Solution' in 2012,⁷⁶ in the form of direct budget aid, funding and taxes related to the Regional Processing Centre (the offshore Australian immigration detention facility located on the island of Nauru), and costly monthly visa fees for refugees.⁷⁷

In the European case, the financial instruments underpinning external migration policy include a fragmented myriad of EU budget allocations and member state contributions to development, crisis management and humanitarian aid, as well as foreign, enlargement and neighbourhood policies. Chief among them are those financed under the Development Cooperation Instrument (such as the AENEAS programme, 2004–2006), the European Development Fund, Home Affairs funds, the European Neighbourhood Instrument and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.⁷⁸ More recently, during the European 'migration crisis' of 2015, the launch of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa marked a qualitative leap, as it pooled together all of the existing EU monies plus complementary amounts pledged by the member states to establish a migration-related funding instrument of an unprecedented magnitude (€4 billion for 2015–2018), governed jointly by the EU institutions and the donor countries.⁷⁹ This has become the largest source of EU funding to countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad region, the Horn of Africa and North Africa, which means that the rest of the EU's external

⁷⁵ Barnett and Duvall, 'Power in international politics', pp. 48, 52–3.

⁷⁶ Australia's policy of diverting asylum seekers to offshore detention centres on Pacific Ocean islands.

⁷⁷ Rebecca Strating, 'Enabling authoritarianism in the Indo-Pacific: Australian exemptionalism', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74: 3, 2020, pp. 301–21 at pp. 311–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1744516>.

⁷⁸ Leonhard den Hertog, *Money talks: mapping the funding for EU external migration policy* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2016).

⁷⁹ Federica Zardo, 'The EU Trust Fund for Africa: geopolitical space making through migration policy instruments', *Geopolitics* 27: 2, 2022, pp. 584–603 at pp. 591–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1815712>.

policies are being subsumed and structured by the (anti-)migration priority, with far-reaching implications in terms of structural migration power. Similarly, bilateral migration deals such as the ones the EU concluded with Tunisia, Mauritania and Egypt between 2023 and 2024 all revolve around a vast display of EU funding (concessional loans, macro-financial assistance, grants). Here, and more generally, financial support is an area where structural power often intersects with the compulsory power exercised through political conditionality. It can thus be hard to empirically disentangle the two types of power. As explained by Nora El Qadim, while ‘the idea that third countries can be motivated to cooperate on migration control through “financial incentives” is ever present’ in EU policy-making circles, ‘actually trailing and locating budgets that can be pinpointed as such’ (as specific positive conditionality) represents a challenge.⁸⁰

A second way of directly constituting the capacities of state actors in global South countries is through what is precisely referred to as *capacity-building*. Migration-related activities under this umbrella range from international projects seeking to strengthen national immigration and asylum systems in line with international human rights and protection standards—an objective included in the 2018 UN global compacts on migration and refugees, and all EU mobility partnerships—to security assistance consisting in equipping and training foreign police and military forces in charge of migration and border control (e.g. coastguards).⁸¹ What is noteworthy about capacity-building is that, besides material capabilities, the direct social relations involved nurture what practice scholars call ‘emergent power’—that is, endogenous resources (social skills or competencies) that emerge ‘from the interaction *per se*’, produced ‘in and through a particular practice’⁸²—as well as communities of practice,⁸³ which may partially rebalance structural power asymmetries. Finally, capacity-building activities also (re)shape local knowledge, understandings and policy categorizations of mobility/migration,⁸⁴ which adds an element of productive migration power.

For all the reasons above, structural migration power constitutes not only capacities but also actors themselves and their self-understanding and interests at all levels—from elite individuals and networks to bureaucratic units, to governments and even entire states. Examples of these types of constitutive effects from the EU’s external migration policy include the establishment in 2003 of a specific migration and border surveillance directorate within the Moroccan Ministry of

⁸⁰ Nora El Qadim, ‘The funding instruments of the EU’s negotiation on external migration policy. Incentives for cooperation?’, in Sergio Carrera et al., eds, *EU external migration policies in an era of global mobilities: intersecting policy universes* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2018), pp. 343–5. Migrant/diaspora remittances to, and financial investments in, sending countries may also be considered as falling under the funding mechanism of structural migration power.

⁸¹ Simone Tholens and Abdullah Al-Jabassini, ‘(Re)ordering the Mediterranean: the evolution of security assistance as an international practice’, *Mediterranean Politics* 29: 4, 2024, pp. 433–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183658>; See Robinson, ‘Offshoring and outsourcing’.

⁸² Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, ‘Power in practice: negotiating the international intervention in Libya’, *European Journal of International Relations* 20: 4, 2014, pp. 889–911 at p. 893, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113512702>.

⁸³ Federica Bicchì, ‘Communities of practice and what they can do for International Relations’, *Review of International Studies* 48: 1, 2022, pp. 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0262010521000528>.

⁸⁴ Jegen, ‘“Migratizing” mobility’.

Interior in response to European pressures and incentives,⁸⁵ and the externally-led creation and ex ante international recognition of the Libyan Government of National Accord in late 2015, carried out with the aim of giving European actors a unified and legitimate Libyan governmental partner to work with for migration control purposes.⁸⁶ More broadly, at the state level, the structurally led constitution of actors and interests has led to the emergence of what Adamson and Tsourapas call the ‘neo-liberal migration state’ in the global South. This model of migration state is characterized by having ‘an incentive to capitalize on cross-border mobility, treating both voluntary and forced migration as a commodity that can be utilized to enhance state revenue and power’.⁸⁷ For this purpose, it resorts, among other things, to ‘refugee rent-seeking behaviour’.⁸⁸

On this point, one final, crucial mechanism where structural migration power converges with productive migration power is the *attribution of migration state roles*, such as those of sending, transit and destination countries. This functional differentiation stems from a global role structure—a ‘configuration of subject positions that shared ideas make available to its holders’⁸⁹—which ‘generate[s] differential privileges and capacities’.⁹⁰ Yet, in addition to the capacities and interests created by direct social relations, the constitution of migration state roles also incorporates a substantial knowledge, discourse, identity and normative load: that is, a productive power dimension.

Productive migration power

Productive power works through diffuse social relations of constitution that engender ‘subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification’.⁹¹ Operating at the levels of discourse and social identities (the distinctive focus of constructivist and post-structuralist IR theories), its effects in international migration governance are produced through at least three types of mechanisms: discourses of crisis and (de)securitization, categorization and international norm dynamics. Productive power appears as the most diffuse type of migration power. While many of the processes involved are typically initiated and conveyed by state and non-state actors from the global North, they are also wilfully taken over and reproduced by

⁸⁵ Irene Fernández-Molina and Miguel Hernando de Larramendi, ‘Migration diplomacy in a de facto destination country: Morocco’s new intermestic migration policy and international socialization by/with the EU’, *Mediterranean Politics* 27: 2, 2022, pp. 212–35 at p. 219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1758449>.

⁸⁶ Irene Fernández-Molina and Alfonso Casani, ‘International recognition meets areas of limited statehood: practices and effects on hybrid actors in post-2011 Libya’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17: 5, 2023, pp. 624–45 at pp. 638–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2245960>.

⁸⁷ Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, ‘The migration state in the global South: nationalizing, developmental, and neoliberal models of migration management’, *International Migration Review* 54: 3, 2020, pp. 853–82 at p. 868, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319879057>.

⁸⁸ Tsourapas, ‘The Syrian refugee crisis’; Luisa F. Freier, Nicholas R. Micinski and Gerasimos Tsourapas, ‘Refugee commodification: the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking in the global South’, *Third World Quarterly* 42: 11, 2021, pp. 2747–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1956891>.

⁸⁹ Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 257.

⁹⁰ Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, p. 54.

⁹¹ Barnett and Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, pp. 43, 48.

their global South counterparts in accordance with their own international and domestic identities and interests. Also, counter-processes such as desecuritization and norm contestation reflect the agency and relative power of an even broader variety of actors, not least of a non-state nature.

Chief among the mechanisms of productive migration power is the pervasive and consequential *discourse of migration as crisis*. These two ideas have become inseparable in the media, public and policy talk irrespective of the complex, 'contingent and multifaceted' relationship between them.⁹² The crisis framing has long been present in global North representations such as those of irregular migration through the US southern border, either in the variant of a US–Mexico 'border crisis' or as a 'refugee crisis' caused by the influx of asylum-seekers from central America.⁹³ It has also had a particular purchase in the European context since the very establishment of the EU in the 1990s, due to a combination of anxieties about losing state sovereignty, the difficulties of reconciling intra-EU free movement of people with extra-EU immigration control, and a series of specific 'crises'.⁹⁴ In turn, by a mix of contagion from the North and self-interest, many global South transit countries nowadays 'adopt the same narratives and strategies and construct mobile populations who pass through as dangers or threats to be contained'.⁹⁵ Even more important is the question of what the crisis discourse 'does politically' in migration governance:⁹⁶ how it tends to obscure structural factors including structural migration power; how it elicits and legitimizes short-term emergency measures that tend to thereafter stay and consolidate as new routine practices; and how permanent crisis may ultimately become the new normal.⁹⁷ These power dynamics and problematic effects largely coincide with those attributed to the *securitization of migration*, a series of social-discursive processes which are based on the construction of an existential threat demanding extraordinary policy responses and which have received particular attention in the EU context.⁹⁸

A parallel mechanism of productive power lies in the *(re)production of legal and policy categories*, and thereby of the social identities and capacities of the affected actors, primarily migrants. Classification and labelling processes draw the empirically uncertain line between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration, adding at times new in-between boxes ('survival migration', 'mixed flows', 'transit migration')

⁹² Céline Cantat, Antoine Pécoud and Hélène Thiollet, 'Migration as crisis', *American Behavioral Scientist*, publ. online 6 July 2023, p. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231182889>.

⁹³ See Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz and Immanuel Ness, *The Oxford handbook of migration crises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹⁴ Cantat, Pécoud and Thiollet, 'Migration as crisis', pp. 7–10.

⁹⁵ Menjivar, Ruiz and Ness, *The Oxford handbook of migration crises*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Julien Jeandesboz and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, 'Crisis, routine, consolidation: the politics of the Mediterranean migration crisis', *Mediterranean Politics* 21: 2, 2026, pp. 316–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2016.1145825>.

⁹⁷ Jane McAdam, 'Conceptualizing "crisis migration": a theoretical perspective', in Susan F. Martin, Sanjula Weerasinghe and Abbie Taylor, eds., *Humanitarian crises and migration: causes, consequences and responses* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 28–50.

⁹⁸ Didier Bigo, 'Security and immigration: toward a critique of the governmentality of unease', *Alternatives* 27: 1, 2002, pp. 63–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754020270S105>; Gabriella Lazaridis and Khursheed Wadia, eds., *The securitization of migration in the EU: debates since 9/11* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Valeria Bello, 'The spiraling of the securitization of migration in the EU: from the management of a "crisis" to a governance of human mobility?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48: 6, 2022, pp. 1327–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851464>; Kinacioglu, 'Militarized governance'.

which still fall short of capturing the complexity of the experiences of actual migrants.⁹⁹ At the same time, welcoming and protective forms of migrant categorization may sometimes work as vehicles of soft power.¹⁰⁰ More broadly, the main questions about power and categories concern the political processes behind the latter, the agendas and interests they serve,¹⁰¹ as well as the effects they have on their recipients, especially on migrants.¹⁰² The same applies, at a different level, to the aforementioned migration state categories that are imposed on third countries.

Finally, productive migration power may also be exercised in the context of international *norm diffusion and contestation* dynamics. The first of these two concepts has been long associated with the EU's purportedly distinctive international identity as a 'normative power', in terms of founding principles (liberal democratic norms) as well as aims and means of external influence (norm diffusion).¹⁰³ The 'ability to shape conceptions of "normal"'¹⁰⁴ beyond European borders operates through processes of international socialization 'directed toward a state's internalization of the constitutive beliefs and practices institutionalized in its international environment',¹⁰⁵ most often under conditions of hierarchy or hegemony.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, it cannot be totally separated from structural power. In turn, regarding the agency of the recipients (primarily third state actors in neighbouring and/or global South countries), responses may vary from normative suasion (deep internalization) to role-playing to strategic calculation,¹⁰⁷ if not to hidden or explicit contestation of the EU-promoted norms.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion and policy implications

This article has addressed a salient debate in international studies today—the interplay between migration, foreign policy-making and power—and established the important, albeit incomplete, picture that existing frameworks offer to researchers and policy-makers. The concept and typology of migration power, as

⁹⁹ Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, 'Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's "migration crisis"', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44: 1, 2018, pp. 48–64 at pp. 50–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224>.

¹⁰⁰ Rosina, 'Migration and soft power'.

¹⁰¹ Roger Zetter, 'More labels, fewer refugees: remaking the refugee label in an era of globalization', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20: 2, 2007, pp. 172–92, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/femo11>.

¹⁰² Joy Moncrieffe and Rosalind Eyben, eds, *The power of labelling: how people are categorized and why it matters* (London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2007).

¹⁰³ See Enrico Fassi, Michela Ceccorulli and Sonia Lucarelli, 'An illiberal power? EU bordering practices and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2261–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad228>; Christine Nissen and Jakob Dreyer, 'From optimist to sceptical liberalism: re forging European Union foreign policy amid crises', *International Affairs* 100: 2, 2024, pp. 675–90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae013>.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40: 2, 2002, pp. 235–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

¹⁰⁵ Frank Schimmelfennig, 'International socialization in the new Europe: rational action in an institutional environment', *European Journal of International Relations* 6: 1, 2000, pp. 109–39 at pp. 111–12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135406610006001005>.

¹⁰⁶ Fernández-Molina and Hernando de Larramendi, 'Migration diplomacy', pp. 215–18.

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey T. Checkel, ed., *International institutions and socialization in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 10–14.

¹⁰⁸ Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Simone Tholens, eds, *Resisting Europe: practices of contestation in the Mediterranean Middle East* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), pp. 11–15.

proposed here, contributes to producing a fuller theoretical understanding of the complexity, diffusion, multidimensional spread and asymmetrical distribution of power in international migration governance. In detailing compulsory, institutional, structural and productive migration power, the article sets the stage for a more fruitful debate between IR and migration scholars.

In this first intervention, we have focused on the varied role of the state in managing cross-border mobility, given its historical and contemporary centrality in this sphere. However, this does not imply that other actors do not also exercise migration power. In fact, one of the article's aims is to embed migration in an ongoing international studies debate on how power operates in world politics beyond the formal realms of the state system. This type of interdisciplinary discussion will enable further attention to be given to non-state actors and migrants themselves—not as an analytic afterthought or as disconnected state-focused analyses, but within the broader framework of migration power that is put forward here.

Insights from the migration power framework travel beyond academic debates to inform policy thinking about the complex implications of the management of human mobility for today's shifting international order, and vice versa. Our work demonstrates the extent to which varied forms of migration are embedded in sites of contestation globally: international cooperation is increasingly sidestepped as migration becomes an instrument of leverage through novel forms of power—beyond coercion or material resources to norm diffusion and the leveraging of expertise to (re)define the political agenda. This does not occur via a 'one-size-fits-all' approach: the *direct* workings of migration power in externalizing migration controls via the 2022 UK–Rwanda deal or the 2024 EU–Egypt agreement come into sharp contrast with the *diffuse* manner through which Brussels condemned Belarus for 'instrumentaliz[ing] migrants for political purposes' in 2021.¹⁰⁹ Analytically grappling with this complexity should lead to more reflexivity in policy-making and more sensitivity among practitioners, that is, more critical awareness by actors of the causes and consequences of problems as well as the positive and negative effects of their own interventions therein.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, a clearer understanding of how power relations are manifested in migration governance paves the way for more equitable and effective responses to the management of labour and forced migration.

¹⁰⁹ Simon Petrequin, 'EU to keep fighting Belarus's "weaponization" of migrants', Associated Press, 22 Oct. 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-middle-east-poland-migration-belarus-79b070bf8899e393f21d9a6fa1450919>.

¹¹⁰ Scholten, 'Mainstreaming versus alienation', p. 112.