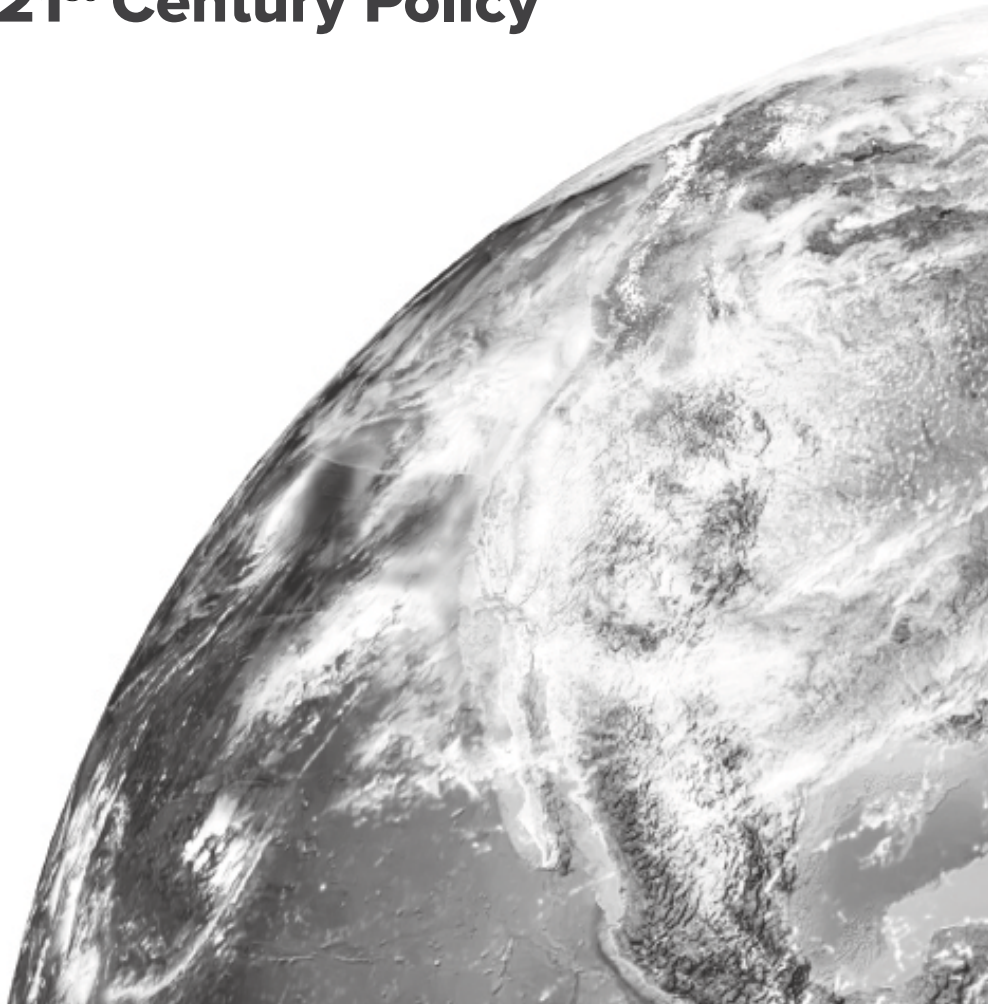




**BORDERS IN  
GLOBALIZATION**

**BIG POLICY BRIEF**  
**Vol. 1 No. 11 December 2019**

# **Migration: A Multidimensional Challenge for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policy**



# A Multidimensional Challenge for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policy

Borders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are incredibly complex. Far from being the static lines on maps imagined by many, contemporary borders are highly variable, multi-dimensional constructs that are as dependant on time as they are on space. It is often easy for non-experts to forget in times of peace or relative tranquility that borders are even there, as their relevance can be rather easily shifted into the background; borders are a line separating one region from another, one language from another, one market from another. Yet in times of trouble, borders take on a new prominence in both policy circles and in national discourse. When natural disasters occur, or when disasters of human design threaten the stability of borders, those formally “static lines” of public imagination become sites of tension, debate, and conflict. These periods of heightened anxiety reveal the sometimes-dizzying complexity of geo-political boundaries.

## THE RESEARCH

Through the Borders in Globalization program, researchers have cast a wide net in their investigations of how borders are understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Many of these investigations have looked at how contemporary bordering processes transcend the “territorial trap” of older border research. This new phase of investigation has shown the complexity of borders as processes and borders as constructs. In this Monthly Briefing, we turn to an examination of migration across borders, where the complexity of these human-made [constructs](#) is brought into sharp relief.

Any examination of borders and migration will almost immediately uncover the temporal nature of borders. Just as the relevance of various border policies ebb and flow over time, so too do the mechanisms by which transboundary movement is regulated. Border constructs are subject to the shifting contexts in which they operate. In times when the border between two nations is stable and flows are relatively stable or

regular, border policy can operate by convention, or through established protocols. But times are not always stable, and when crises emerge, conventions or protocols are no longer enough to meet the conditions on the ground. Consider the Syrian refugee crisis and the Canadian response to the increased need for refugee resettlement. Canadian refugee policy was effectively superseded by an almost ad hoc arrangement responding not only to the crisis, but to popular sentiment domestically, and to calls for assistance from abroad. In this case, the Canadian border as a process and a construct was responding to events occurring thousands of kilometres away. In other words, the Canadian border [stretched](#) out beyond the boundaries of North America in response to an international crisis.

Yet refugee crises are not the only space where the complexities of borders manifest. Not all who move across borders are fleeing persecution or war; many cross international boundaries in search of increased [economic opportunity](#), or for the chance to establish networks of remittance. This phenomenon is a common one not only in North America, but across Europe and Asia, where each year, millions of people cross borders to work (legally or illegally) in foreign nations where the opportunity to earn is greater than they could find at home. Such flows often present challenges to states and to their border policies; on the one hand, illegal migrations are often discouraged as they are viewed as a violation of national sovereignty – or even as a source of risk. On the other, many states benefit from the presence of such workers, as their labour power augments that of the borderlands, they work in. Still other states attempt to establish regulations over labour migrations as in the Canadian case, where foreign workers could migrate into Canada to join the workforce as non-citizen workers. Rather than such migrations emerging in response to conflict or disaster, economic migration of this sort instead responds to shift in regional and global economies; as

national economies surge, those states might expect to see increases in irregular economic migration.

Such migrations are subject to scrutiny, and the status – and categorization – of migrants is often informed by public sentiment as much as it is by the intentions of the migrants themselves. In Europe, as Western European states experienced increased flows of refugees from the Middle East, debates swirled around how to [categorize](#) them; should they be called “refugees”, or “economic migrants”? Certainly these categories are not discrete, as it is possible for a person to be both, but the debate highlights the extent to which migration and the policies attempting to govern it are embedded in the same social processes.

There is a further complication to the challenge of addressing patterns of global migration: the position of “quasi” states or [“unofficial”](#) states in international relations. While the international community is largely composed of mutually recognized sovereign states, there remain several regions whose identity or statehood remain contested – or ignored as a matter of policy. Consider the case of Palestine, or the troubled position of Chechnya or even Catalonia as “states”.

Before states like Canada or the United States, or polities like the European Union can have a policy to address international migration into their respective spaces, they must first address the extent to which they recognize the states from which these migrations emerge. If the EU for example, were to recognize refugees from Palestine (and by extension granting a measure of recognition to the “state” of Palestine), would that set precedent through which migrants from Quebec might attempt to claim refugee status in France? Though far-fetched, such a hypothetical scenario points to the difficulties inherent in the politics of recognition that are implicated in refugee discourse.

## **THE POLICY**

The challenges presented in this Monthly Briefing are less about specific policy goals and more about underscoring the importance of flexibility and adaptability in border theory, research, and policy. Scholars cannot afford to freeze borders in amber in their research; to do so would overlook the time-dependant nature of borders. Similarly, policy makers cannot afford to give in to the temptation of producing static, discrete categorizations of transboundary migrants, as doing so ignores the complexity of migrant identity and intent.

As the world continues to globalize, and as states continue to grapple with increasing numbers of cross-border migrants, the importance of adaptability will only continue to grow, making programs like Borders in Globalization indispensable to future work on borders and bordering processes.

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More information and research can be found by visiting the Borders in Globalization [website](#).

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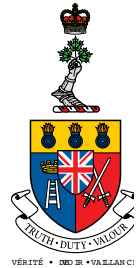


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