Over the last four years, since the peak of the refugee/migration crisis in 2015-16, the global north has stumbled between welcoming and closing itself to new waves of migration. With more than 65 million people currently uprooted within or outside their countries, and with many of them in limbo for years at a time, the search is on for solutions to the problem of mass displacement. Towards the end of 2018, the international community agreed global compacts on migration and refugees, but while the aims are worthy many wonder if much will come of them based on the record of similar international agreements so far. Nor is there much confidence that the current refugee architecture is up to the task: the three conventional solutions to displacement—repatriation of refugees, their local integration, or their resettlement—seem unable to address the challenge on the scale needed.

Only a small proportion of the displaced find their situation resolved through such pathways: most languish in camps or are self-settled in cities in precarious and constrained circumstances for years and even decades at a time without legitimate means of making a living or leading a decent life.

Against this background, a number of radical proposals have emerged to attempt to resolve refugee and migration challenges, including new nations, city states and free zones. These suggestions have been dismissed as fantasies by the refugee commentariat; but perhaps such seemingly outlandish proposals should not be dismissed out of hand. We have reviewed several of them and proposed an alternative: a confederal, transnational polity emerging from the connections built up by refugees, with the help of sympathizers, that we have called Refugia. Unlike many of the proposals we have reviewed, we do not envisage this as an island or other bounded territory, but a linked set of territories and spaces connecting refugees into a polity that is neither a new nation state nor simply an international organization, but has some characteristics of both. It would be governed by refugees and migrants themselves, and would link refugee and migrant communities globally. The key feature of Refugia is that its different parts are connected, with mobility between them, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In our view such a transnational polity could meet the needs of refugees without compromising too much the interests of states, with a much better outcome for both than the current incoherent and inhuman set-up.

We argue that such a transnational polity is already imperfectly prefigured in many of the transnational practices that refugees and migrants deploy and the environments in which they find themselves today. Camps and communities in countries neighbouring conflicts, neighbourhoods in global cities, transnational political practices and money transfers, emergent communities in disparate locations en route: all are fragments that taken separately do not seem to promise much. But cumulatively they could add up to Refugia, imperfectly prefigured. Consolidating them into a common polity might prove to be a way out of the current impasse.