

Courting Latin American Emigrants and the Redefinition of Citizenship

By Ana Margheritis*

Although not a new practice, courting diasporas to cultivate bonds with emigrants has become a generalised and enhanced practice around the world as a form of governing populations abroad. Together with the recent process of national legislation update, policy reform and regional agreements reached in Latin America, it is contributing to redefine the notion and the practice of citizenship at the national and regional level. Four main features of these processes are highlighted here.

First, state efforts to forge bonds with emigrants *may or may not engage emigrants* -- a point resumed below -- but it certainly involves a number of other actors too and, therefore, *offer multiple channels for cross-regional cooperation*.

Courting diasporas involves extending state authority to govern its population abroad. This is generally done in (formal and informal) collaboration with other states and non-state actors, involving relations at various levels of governance (i.e., not just national but also local, regional, and cross-regional). As a result, a number of institutions and mechanisms are created, linking countries and regions and opening up opportunities for partnerships with receiving states at the national and local level, NGOs, churches, etc. However, it is worth noting that very little scholarly and political attention has been given to the links between regions or trans-regional and local governance. In the realm of policy, we would expect to see a number of public-partnerships in place, but this is not the case in major sites of destination for Latin American emigrants coming to Europe, such as London, Madrid, and Milan¹. In short, efforts to forge bonds inevitably open areas of trans-regional cooperation for public and private actors. For the regions under consideration here, this opportunity has not being fully seized yet.

Second, transnational *bonds and migrant engagement are generally assumed* rather than investigated, while *states' capacities are probably overestimated*.

Although the experience of cultivating relations between states of origin and

¹For examples, see Margheritis, Ana. "Brasileiros no Mundo. A Global Approach to Governing Populations Abroad?" *International Affairs*, 93(3): 607-623, May 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix049>; also "Transnational Associational Life and Political Mobilization of Ecuadorians and Argentines in Spain and Italy: What Role for Sending State Policies?" *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 19, Issue 2/3, 2017, pp. 254-280

emigrants has been documented for several cases, we do not know yet if policies are effective in this realm. There are no comprehensive and systematic studies of the impact of diaspora engagement policies. My own work documents that results have been mixed. This is partly the result of the evolution of these policies, several of which still face policy implementation and other challenges. State capacity in Latin America is still limited, especially at a long distance.

Policies in this area tend to follow different trajectories in each country.² Electoral cycles bring new perspectives and political orientation, thus adding to ruptures and detours. Interestingly enough, no country has tried to measure its impact on these matters.

My work on Southern Europe shows that the capacity of sending states to mobilise emigrants politically varies across countries of origin and across emigrants' destinations, and emigrants' organisation is largely fragmented and intermittent. This is compounded by the fact that at home emigration has not resonated enough in domestic public debates. The issue usually gathers attention temporarily but it is never a constant, high priority concern. Together with other factors, this leads me to argue that courting diasporas advances through cycles of variable intensity of commitment and action. In the absence of emigration crises or a dramatic increase in migrant mobilization, it is plausible to expect the continuity of fluid, selective interactions between states and diasporas. Most likely, these exchanges will exhibit variable levels of both parties' engagement, or cycles of intense state involvement and bureaucratic inertia that may (or may not) converge with cycles of involvement and withdrawal in migrant activism and political mobilization.

Third, *the political dimension of bonding remains weak*. In particular, in the Latin American Southern Cone, emigrants' *enfranchising exhibits and 'inclusion paradox'* today.

Together with other measures, enfranchising emigrants is part of the invitation issued to expatriates to have a voice in the fate of the country, participate in home politics, and make membership to the nation effective. However, regarding the exercise of those entitlements, both states and citizens abroad have fallen short of enacting them, hence the paradox.³ In comparison to other diaspora engagement initiatives, extra-territorial voting rights were not the priority. Governments did not

² See Margheritis, Ana. *Migration Governance across Regions: State-Diaspora Relations in the Latin American-Southern Europe Corridor*. New York and London: Routledge. 2016.

³ See Margheritis, Ana. "The Inclusion Paradox of Enfranchising Expats in Latin America," *International Migration*, 55(2): 126-143, DOI: 10.1111/imig12315, April 2017.



act on this diligently or consistently. Progress toward approving parliamentary representation or empowering emigrant communities is very limited. There is little effort to expand voting rights beyond national presidential elections, encourage political mobilization, and increase turnout. As for citizens abroad, turnout has been quite low and political mobilization ambivalent and intermittent. This suggests the need to expand our understanding of emigrants' response to opportunities to exercise voting rights as part and parcel of a broader, complex link with the country of origin – a link that reflects their ambiguous relationship with home politics. Incipient studies on this dimension have started to document that several emigrant communities of Latin American origin exhibit lack of interest in exercising voting rights and have an ambivalent attitude to voting. Their political engagement is shaped not necessarily by political motivations or partisan preferences alone but a mix of patriotism, nostalgia, and daily pressing needs that often supersede concerns with home politics, as well as negative attitudes about the institutions and/or politics that prompted their departure.

Fourth, for these reasons, *to what extent has the notion and the practice of citizenship become transnationalised* within and across regions?

This question requires re-conceptualising the issue from a dual perspective. We need to integrate the top-down process of enfranchisement by states (even if it may be prompted by social activism) with the bottom-up process embedded in the practices of individual and/or collective actors (i.e., emigrants, the addressees of such policy innovation or adaptation) who may or may not be willing to cultivate those bonds and pursue collective political mobilisation. We have a relatively well knowledge of the former, and a patchy record of the latter. Integrating both may unveil some neglected subjective factors, which are obviously difficult to measure. For example, most of the studies assume that emigrants, indeed, want to be included in the nation of origin and cultivate bonds. However, for some communities distrust of the state is a generalized sentiment, rooted in a long-standing crisis of political representation, unmet social expectations, and memories of the political and economic crises that prompted emigration. This tends to discourage transnational engagement. The call to contribute to the country of origin's re-construction and development still resonates with feelings and aspirations of some citizens abroad, but in many cases, it does not overcome the uneasiness caused by a traumatic record of state abuses and political disillusion. In addition, when origin and destination are geographically distant, transnational political practices have been proved weak. Again, we need to investigate this area in depth and from a dual (top-down and bottom-up) perspective to be able to discuss real policy impact.

Finally, generalizations and conclusions can only be partial. For most of the policies

analysed here, it is too early to assess the long-term implications. The same can be said of regional agreements and the political project in the making to foster regional citizenship.

Indeed, Latin American states have moved towards encouraging regional citizenship lately via MERCOSUR (Common Market of the South) and UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) agreements, as a way of transnational citizenship within a region. Although this is a project that affects intra-regional migrants only, today the region is a mini-laboratory of whether citizenship beyond borders is being re-defined as a notion and as a practice. So far, my work on this dimension of the topic shows that the project is largely based on the principle of residency and portable socio-economic rights, leaving political rights and political representation (of both Latin Americans and extra-regional migrants alike) out of the negotiations. Moreover, ethnographic work shows that the project might be hindered by states' weak capacities and the lack of cognitive and affective roots. For this reason, to some extent, it mirrors the historical evolution that national citizenship had in South America and it is still a light version of transnational citizenship that I labelled 'a figurative frontier.'⁴

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⁴ On this point, see Ana Margheritis, "South American Regional Citizenship as Figurative Frontier: European Influences in a Political Project in the Making," in *Shaping Migration between Europe and Latin America: New Perspectives and Challenges*, ed. by Ana Margheritis, London: ILAS Book Series, forthcoming in May 2018.