Is Political Transnationalism a Mechanism for Peacebuilding in the Ongoing Security Crisis in Mexico?

Over 150,000 people were intentionally killed in Mexico from December 2006 through to the end of 2015 after the Mexican government decided to openly combat organised crime (Open Society Foundations, 2016). Since the beginning of the so-called “war against drugs”, civilians have suffered killings, disappearances, torture, and countless human rights violations carried out both by cartels and by state and federal forces (Open Society Foundations: 2016, Acosta 2012, Grillo 2011).

The “war” against organised crime has created a context of increasing insecurity and escalating violence, impunity, and corruption across the entire country govern (Bosch 2014, Anaya Muñoz 2015, Estrello 2011). Against the backdrop of the security crisis, members of Mexican society have organised national and transnational movements to denounce the government. Mexicans living in the United States, Spain, France, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, and other places around the world have engaged politically to demonstrate their support for the victims and denounce the incapacity of the current State to either govern, or recognise and respond to the on-going conflict (Bosch 2014, Estrello 2011, Maihold 2012).

This paper looks at the political transnational movements organised by Mexican migrants living specifically in Brussels and Paris to answer the following question: Is political transnationalism a tool for peacebuilding for the Mexican ongoing security crisis? This paper argues that the lobbying, advocacy, and art-based strategies deployed by migrants living abroad can contribute to a certain extent to the peacebuilding process of their home country in a very creative way. Indeed, this paper demonstrates that the case of Mexican in Europe highlights the multiple forms of transnational engagement deployed by migrants to raise awareness about the conflict in their host societies and create bottom-up strategies to change the dynamics of the security crisis back in their homeland.

Overall, this paper contributes to the study of political transnationalism in three ways. First, by analysing extra-electoral political strategies deployed by migrants living abroad. Second, by unpacking the emotions and feelings triggering transnational political engagement in times of conflict and, finally, by recognising that transnational political strategies have an impact in peacebuilding processes.

The paper is organised as follows. The first part presents an overview of the Mexican conflict. The second introduces the role of diasporas in conflict zones. This section underlines the impact
that migrant communities have in the peacebuilding process. The third part of the article introduces the specific case of the Mexican migrant community engaging in peacebuilding strategies from Paris and Belgium. This section argues that the transnational political activism developed and sustained by migrants has timidly helped denounce the ongoing conflict from abroad; raise awareness about the human rights violations and high levels of violence; and build capacity strategies to alleviate the conflict. The data presented in the last section has been collected through ethnographic methods including participant observation in political and cultural events, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Mexican communities living in Brussels and Paris. Ethnography seemed suitable to explore transnational peacebuilding mechanisms since it can shed light on cultural conditions; reveal emotions and feelings in times of crisis and focus on the migration and security experiences lived by the interviewees (Dauphinee 2015).

**Defining the Mexican conflict**

Several academics and journalists have determined that the ongoing security Mexican crisis is a war because of the number of victims and human rights violations; the tactics and atrocities committed on the battle field; the incapacity of the state to reduce violence; and the prevalence of impunity and lack of accountability in the country (Bosch 2014, Anaya Muñoz 2015, Estrello 2011; Maihold 2012). Nevertheless, neither the Mexican government nor the international authorities have recognised a real state of emergency in the country even though international organisations and think tanks have demonstrated that since 2007 the rise in the number of intentional homicides and the high level of violent criminality reveal that Mexico is indeed a conflict zone (UNODC 2013; IISS Armed Conflict Survey 2017, Voronkova 2017).

Mexico is characterised by a fragile political and social context where violence, impunity and corruption prevail in many regions of the country (Bailey 2014, Estévez and Vázquez 2015, Ríos 2015, Grillo 2011 and 2016, Rosen and Zepeda 2017). Between 2007 and 2014 the Mexican drug war has claimed more than 83,000 lives in a mix of firefights, ambushes, and executions (Grillo 2016: 255).

The methods used by the drug cartels to achieve their goals are very violent and include techniques arguably used by insurgents and militias such as car bombs, vigilante militias, kidnappings, beheadings, and torture (Langton, 2012; Nava, 2011, Grillo 2016). Like in any other conflict, the outcomes of the Mexican ongoing security crisis also include internally
displaced persons and refugees fleeing the country to other countries, especially to the United States (Rosen and Zepeda 2017).

Indeed, members of the civil society, journalists and civil servants have been affected by the wave of violence in the country. One of the most striking outcomes of the conflict has been the assassination of more than twenty-five hundred public servants, including 220 policemen, 200 soldiers, judges, and dozens of federal officials (Grillo 2011: 110). Furthermore, according to Rosen and Zepeda (2017) from 2006 to 2016, 78 mayors in office were violently killed. Regarding the journalists, the National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH) has reported that since 2000, 123 reporters have been killed in the country. Finally, the number of disappearances, assassinations, and aggressions among the members of the civil society such as activists, human rights defenders and students has also skyrocketed since 2006, when the war against drugs was officially declared (RNDDHM 2017).

Another characteristic of the ongoing conflict in Mexico is the lack of accountability and impunity that prevail in the country. Scholars argue that the Mexican rule of law is weak because of mainly three reasons that can be summarised in: the high level of corruption, the infiltration of drug cartels in the legal system and the constant violation of human rights (Rosen and Zepeda 2017, Bailey 2012, Estévez and Vázquez 2015).

Mexican drug trafficking organisations have been characterised by their economic power which they use to purchase arms, thus overwhelming the state’s police system, confront its military forces, and bribe or coerce the governmental personal at all levels of the political system (Bailey 2012; Smith 2012). Bailey (2012) argues that drug trafficking groups have successfully infiltrated the government, society, and economy in various regions of Mexico. In fact, because of the state rule’s weakness, drug cartels have been able to intimidate members of the government and influence law making, law enforcement and judicial decisions (Bailey, 2012: 477).

Besides the raising power and influence of the drug cartels in the legal and political systems in Mexico, the war against drugs has provoked a regression of human rights (Acosta, 2012). Both the members of the drug cartels and the Mexican military have committed a range of human rights violations. On the one hand, drug cartel carry out activities such as kidnappings, murders and car bombings (Grillo, 2011). On the other hand, the Mexican military violated human rights as a result of anti-drug efforts (Freeman and Sierra, 2004: 289). The number of such violations have increased so dramatically during this period that Amnesty International described it as a
“major human rights crisis” (Acosta, 2012:267). It is important to note that most of these cases have not been investigated and rarely have the culprits been prosecuted because of the weakness of the penitentiary and judicial systems in Mexico (Freeman and Sierra, 2004).

In addition to these crimes, the assassinations of the journalists represent one of the most symbolic cases of impunity in the country with 99.7% of them still unsolved (CNDH 2017). Anaya Muñoz (2015) argues that the Mexican authorities are neither able to investigate properly nor incarcerate the perpetrators of the hundreds of crimes, disappearances and feminicides committed in the country.

Even if Mexico has not been formally recognised as a conflict-zone, the sustained levels of violence over the past eleven years, the number of human rights abuses and disappearances, the unprocessed investigations, and the unpunished crimes reveal the inefficiency and incapability of the Mexican state to protect its citizens.

**Diasporas engaging in conflict-zones for peacebuilding**

Once of the most heated debates in migration studies is the role of diaspora in conflict-zones. The literature studying diasporas present these large migration groups as either peace-makers or peace-wreckers (Smith and Stares 2007). This dichotomy presents a simple way to analyse diasporas as either negative agents perpetuating war or as positive individuals looking for the conflict resolution, committed with peace and state-building (Cochrane 2015, Roth 2015, Koser 2007, Bercovitch 2007, Van Hear and Cohen 2016).

As war perpetrators, it has been argued that diasporas have the power to raise funds for weapons or to lobby in support of political and violent objectives (Adamson 2005, Cochrane 2015). As peace-makers, diasporas have been portrayed as political mediators or economic agents aiming to send remittances to surpass the state of emergency and advocate for the termination of the conflict (Van Hear and Cohen 2016, Smith and Stares 2007).

In fact, the analysis of diasporas engaging in conflict situations is more complex than this dichotomy. Diasporas are not homogenous groups and as such, their interests, motivations, and level of engagement with their homelands in periods of conflict vary. Diasporas engagement depends on the one hand on their capacity and desire (Koser 2007) to develop extra-territorial networks and on the other hand on the specificities of the conflict (Cochrane 2015, Roth 2015, Koser 2007, Bercovitch 2007). Indeed, both the intensity and the stage of the conflict determine
the ability of migrant communities to engage with their homeland societies in war and to have direct access to the field.

Scholars have explored the role of diasporas in post-conflict and peacebuilding efforts (Kahl and Puig Larrauri 2013, Welch et al. 2015, Brinkerhoff 2007). Peace-building is a very complex concept which encompasses economic, social, and political efforts implemented by national and international actors aiming to: negotiate and consolidate peace; alleviate suffering and protect the victims of the war; strengthen governmental institutions; and ultimately reconstruct a democratic state (Christie 2013, Call 2008, Bush and Duggan 2014, Barnett et al. 2007).

As clearly argued by Lange and Brown (2016) conflict societies are immensely complex and require not only the reconstruction of the physical damage caused by the violence but also the rebuilding of social relations as well as the healing of psychological traumas (2016: 4). The multi-disciplinary nature of the challenges that conflict and post-conflict societies face makes it very hard for policymakers to develop integral policies able to include all sectors of the civil society and parties involved in the conflict. Furthermore, the specificities of each conflict make it very difficult to standardise the measurement, evaluation, and monitoring processes to assess the impact of the peacebuilding programmes and policies.

One way to start unpacking the complex dynamics and actors involved in peace-building processed is to analyse the measures developed by the members of the civil society, organisations, and diasporas. For instance, some of the actions undertaken by diasporas for peacebuilding include: early response and sharing information programs, programs fostering contact and collaboration between stakeholders involved in the conflict; and programs aiming to promote peaceful and pro-peace policies (Kahl and Puig Larrauri 2013, Welch et al. 2015, Brinkerhoff 2007).

Indeed, diasporas have developed creative initiatives to influence the processes of peacebuilding and conflict-recovery back in their homelands. For instance, Shank and Schrich (2008) documented how art-based strategies such as music, painting, theatre, yoga, and sculpture have helped individuals recover from conflict in Sri Lanka, Venezuela, and Palestine. These art initiatives developed constitute a novel way to communicate and channel emotions, ideas, and feelings, which in the long-term help to alleviate the societal traumas derived from the conflict (Shank and Schrich: 2008).
Another example of innovative practices adopted by diasporas to alleviate the conflict from abroad is the use of communication technologies (ICTs) (Welch et al. 2015, Brinkerhoff 2007). Through internet, social media and webpages diasporas have managed to organise and sustain political movements to advocate for more integrative peacebuilding initiatives. Indeed Welsh et al. (2015) argue that the web constitutes an alternative space where empowered diasporas share information and organise transnational projects for development. The Internet provides diasporas with the opportunity to engage in a networking platform with resources and allies available to sustain a transnational movement. For example, the Afghan-American, the Egyptian and the Somali diasporas have woven virtual advocacy networks to implement peacebuilding and human rights’ initiatives in their respective homelands (Brinkerhoff 2007).

As previously explained, diasporas engage in transnational and peace-building activities if they have the desire and capability to do so (Koser 2007) and if the stage and intensity of the conflict allows them to intervene. The Mexican diaspora living in Brussels and Paris have organised both advocacy and art-based strategies to participate in the peacebuilding process of their homeland from abroad. Several Mexican migrants have reaffirmed their commitment and concern about the ongoing security crisis and have managed to organise and sustain transnational advocacy activities. The next section explores how this population has been able to reduce violence, build capacity, and transform the relationships and dynamics of the Mexican conflict.

**Boosting peace-building through transnational political activism: the case of Mexicans in Europe**

Some members of the Mexican diaspora have expressed their indignation and disapproval of the raising violence, impunity and corruption prevailing in the Mexican society (Turati and Rea 2012, González Villareal 2015). This section discusses how Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris have managed to organise political and cultural activities in their places of residence that have had to a certain extent an impact on the conflict dynamics in Mexico. The aim of this section is to argue that these actions can be portrayed as innovative mechanisms of peacebuilding. Note that the impact and potential of these transnational efforts will not be discussed.

This section presents empirical data collected through immersion in the field both in Paris and Brussels. It was collected through participant observation in political events organised by Mexican migrants and through semi-structured interviews with the diasporic activists. The
ethnographic approach undertaken in this research allowed me to understand the processes, motivations, and interests behind transnational political activism (Herbert 2000). Furthermore, the repeated interactions with my respondents helped me to build trust among Mexican activists and therefore to discuss sensitive topics related to insecurity.

In order to analyse the role of political transnationalism as a mechanism for peacebuilding in Mexico, I will categorise the activities undertaken by the members of the Mexican diaspora in relation to their aims: waging conflict non-violently; reducing direct violence; and transforming relationships and building capacity (Shank and Schrich 2008).

Peacebuilding actions with the purpose of waging conflict non-violently refer to civil-based actions with the aim to “raise public awareness and sympathy, increase understanding of how groups in conflict are interdependent, and balance power by convincing or coercing others to accept the needs or desires of all involved” (Shank and Schrich 2008: 220). This peacebuilding approach accentuates the role of activists aiming at gaining support to transform the political, economic, and social structures challenging the reconstruction of their homelands.

Non-violent activities might include: theatre, symbolic reinterpretation, documentary filmmaking, public murals, art installations and chants (Shank and Schrich 2008). Members of the Mexican diaspora have organised political meetings accompanied with documentary screenings, art-installations and theatre plays to denounce the inefficiency of the Mexican authorities to respond to the ongoing security crisis. Activists and artists make use of the stage to canalise their anger and frustration against the government and Mexican institutions. They are aware of their privileged position to communicate and raise awareness among a Mexican and European audience, as reflected by Ana, a Mexican activist, who stated:

“I have to use music and singing to denounce. If I remain silent, I become part of those cabrones¹ (bastards) (referring to the Mexican authorities) […] If an artist does not use the artistic platform to denounce, they are a waste. The stage is an undeniable space to denounce” (Informal interview, 5th May 2017, Brussels).

Ana has lived in Europe for more than 20 years and performed in France, Italy, and Belgium. She follows very closely the Mexican news and listens every day to Carmen Aristegui, a leading Mexican journalist and left-wing opinion leader in the country. All these years abroad, Ana has managed to combine politics, activism and singing. Sometimes, she makes her own

¹ In this context, cabrones is a Mexican insult commonly used to describe someone’s abusive and despicable behaviour or attitude.
interpretation of traditional Mexican songs by changing the lyrics with political messages to denounce the human rights violations and crimes happening in Mexico. Ana uses traditional melodies known by the Mexican community to deliver a political message through a strong cultural and ethnical channel.

Members of the Mexican diaspora living in Brussels and Paris have also made efforts to reduce the level of violence, prevent and relieve the immediate suffering of the victims in their homeland. For instance, this category of peacebuilding strategies includes the transformation of the legal and judicial system, military intervention, ceasefire agreements and support to refugees (Shank and Schrich 2008).

The political agenda and lobbying strategies of a group of Mexican activists in Paris reflects their concern with the current level of violence. From the 1\textsuperscript{st} to the 9\textsuperscript{th} of April 2017, the group of activists called \textit{Collectif Paris-Ayotzinapa} organised several artistic and political activities to denounce the ongoing security crisis in Mexico. The activities opened for the public included documentary screenings, theatre plays, political discourses, and the opening of an art installation. María de Jesús Tlatempa Bello, mother of José Eduardo, one of disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, was the guest of honour during the so-called “Mexican week in Paris: Disappearances and resistances”.

The presence of María, a testimony of the ongoing security crisis was very important to confer legitimacy to the transnational networks of advocacy and lobbying activities (Kaldor 2003, Stewart 2004). Testimonies are especially relevant, when people advocate in favour of human rights, since they fuel the grievances, moral shocks and emotions that sustain political movements (Stewark 2004, Estrello 2011). The presence of María de Jesús in private lobbying meetings organised by the members of the \textit{Collectif Paris-Ayotzinapa} with international and French authorities, such Emmanuel Decaux, member of the Committee of Enforced Disappearances of the United Nations High Commissioner, was highly valued for the symbolic and political weight that she represents as a victim of the ongoing conflict.

Besides the lobbying efforts to reduce the level of violence undertaken by Mexicans from abroad, members of the Mexican diaspora send remittances to Mexico to alleviate the immediate danger of the security crisis and to support political movements denouncing the current situation (Van Hear 2011). For instance, Antonia, an actress living near Ghent admitted to organising private concerts in her house to collect resources and send them to support peacebuilding and development projects in Mexico.
Antonia’s husband, born in Belgium, supports his wife because of her deep concern regarding the current situation in Mexico. Not only she had the initiative to organise private fundraising events but every time she participates in Mexican political events in Brussels, she shows enthusiasm and eagerness to create a solid Mexican community willing to engage in transnational politics. The cheerful way in which she interacts with people and her passion for dancing portray her Mexican cultural heritage and diasporic identity.

The third type of peacebuilding strategies deployed by activists include long-term efforts aiming to transform relationships and address trauma, transform conflict, and do justice (Shank and Schrich 2008:224). At a personal level this means that activists and artists manage to heal the personal and/or collective trauma caused by the conflict and manage to make public demands for justice.

One example that crystallises the effort of the Mexican activists to heal their personal and collective trauma can be observed in the work done by the group called Bordamos por la Paz París. This group of women, most of them highly educated, gathers in parks or cafes to embroider the names of the disappeared and victims of the Mexican conflict. These events help address the social trauma in several ways. First, women canalise their anger and sorrow by knitting colourful and original designs. Second, during the process of knitting collectively, women share their experiences and emotions regarding the security crisis. The meetings last between two or three hours and are usually accompanied by deep reflections, personal anecdotes, striking stories from the newspapers and from time to time jokes and informal chatting2.

Once the embroideries are completed, the women have the option to display them in other political events and meetings organised by other members of the Mexican diaspora. The fact that the embroideries are exhibited help the women because they feel that they are honouring the victims, their families, raising awareness on the problem and contributing to a complex process of peacebuilding. The pieces of embroidery materialise the alleviation of sadness of the women who knitted them and at the same time create a sense of fulfilment to participate in transformation of the ongoing conflict.

The last way to classify peacebuilding initiatives is building capacity which focus on education, training, research, and evaluation efforts to support sustainable culture of peace (Shank and

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2 Participant Observation in Embroidery events organised by Bordamos Por la Paz on the 22nd July 2015, 5th August 2015 and on the 30th September 2015.
Schrich 2008:26). Members of the Mexican diaspora living in Belgium have undertaken some initiatives to raise awareness among children and present them in a ludic way the insecurity problems that Mexico is facing. During the celebration of the Day of the Death\(^3\) (\textit{Día de los Muertos}) on the 5\(^{th}\) of November 2016, Ana presented an original play accompanied with two musicians and children with Mexican origins. The play made references to the Mexican traditions and celebrations but it also highlighted the number of disappeared and murders in the country.

According to Shank and Schrich (2008) theatre plays are effective social forums to address social injustice, educate and engage in bottom-down solutions for community conflicts. The play for kids presented in Brussels materialises an important initiative to educate the younger generations about the current situation in Mexico. By making references to the Mexican conflict, Ana managed to honour the victims, preserve a millenary tradition overseas and raise awareness among the young members of the Mexican diaspora\(^4\).

**Conclusion**

Even if Mexican authorities have not declared a real state of emergency in the country, the number of victims, fighting strategies and prevalence of impunity and corruption suggest that there is an ongoing conflict in Mexico. In response to the level of violence and dissatisfaction with the government’s response to the national crisis, members of the Mexican diaspora have developed peacebuilding strategies from abroad to change the current situation in Mexico.

Since peacebuilding is a very complex process which encompasses economic, social, and political efforts, it is important to recognise and understand the role that diasporas may have alleviating the conflict from abroad. The examples discussed in this paper represent bottom-up efforts implemented by members of the Mexican diaspora seeking to terminate the conflict and promote reconciliation and reconstruction initiatives.

This paper has argued that the actions undertaken by Mexican migrants have helped, to a certain extent, transform the conflict, reduce direct violence, and build capacity (Shank and Schrich 2008) to improve the security situation in their homeland. Indeed, through transnational political activities, members of the Mexican diaspora living in Brussels and Paris have

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\(^3\) The Day of the Death or \textit{Día de los Muertos} is a Mexican traditional holiday celebrated to honour the memory of the death. The holiday is celebrated throughout the country with altars, called \textit{oferendas}, exhibitions, literature workshops, visits to the cemetery and gastronomic fairs (Zarauz López: 2016).

organised lobbying and art-based activities to raise awareness on the Mexican conflict in Europe, overcome the psychological trauma and advocate for peacebuilding.

Sources of information:


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