



Migrants' Access to Social Protection after Trump and Brexit: What Role for Sending Societies?

Jean-Michel Lafleur

Associate Director, Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies, Université de Liège.

In 2016, strong promises to curb immigration on both sides of the Atlantic were made during the debates that preceded the Brexit Referendum and the US Presidential Elections. Following the pledges of British Conservatives to limit EU migrants' access to welfare in the UK and Donald J. Trump's commitment to deport millions of undocumented migrants, legitimate concerns have emerged in Europe and in the US that migrants may be at further risk of social exclusion in coming years. In parallel to these political developments, Europe has had to deal with a surge in arrival of asylum seekers, which has further politicized the issue of foreigners' access to welfare in destination countries. From the migrants' standpoint, this hostile political context has triggered uncertainty with regards to their own (and their family's) access to a wide variety of rights such as healthcare or a pension. As shown in previous research, such uncertainty may lead them to develop alternative strategies to deal with social risks, including the reliance of community networks or the strengthening of bonds with the homeland. As US and European immigration and welfare policies are transforming in this context of populism and heightened anti-immigration sentiment, it is thus an appropriate time to reflect on the role of sending states in the area of welfare.

In the study of migration, social protection has traditionally been perceived as the primary responsibility of receiving societies. Whether foreigners were coming for work or protection from persecution, it was expected that the welfare institutions in their new countries of residence would provide them with a modicum of protection to deal with social risks in areas such as health, pensions or family benefits. Numerous bilateral social

security agreements and international instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families were developed over the years to guarantee migrants a minimum level of protection. At the regional level, both the EU and the Mercosur have taken additional measures for nationals circulating between Member States of these organizations to ensure that mobility does not entail automatic loss of welfare entitlements (e.g., measures ensuring pension portability or access to public health systems). Curiously however, unilateral responses of sending states to the needs of their citizens abroad is a widely understudied topic.

In a context where immigrant welfare is highly politicized, and where accusations of migrants being a burden on receiving countries are not uncommon, can migrants expect any support from homeland authorities? While some sending states have used rhetorical arguments to denounce the unfair treatment of their citizens in other countries, several sending states in Latin America and beyond have taken specific measures in recent years to respond to the needs of their nationals abroad. Building on some of Mexico's policies towards its citizens, 10 Latin American States are now cooperating in promoting access to healthcare and sometimes even delivering basic health services to migrants in the United States. In Europe, Colombia has also raised awareness about social protection programmes available in the host and home societies in a fair held in London, which last November gathered 700 participants. Similarly, numerous initiatives have been taken at the global level either to facilitate migrants' access to welfare abroad and/or support



the reintegration of return migrants into their homeland's welfare system. As revealed by Hoffmann, Pedroza and Palop García at Giga-Hamburg (<https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/data/emigrant-policies-index-emix-dataset>), sending states' engagement in favour of migrants' social, economic and political rights at home and abroad is becoming increasingly common among Latin American States as well as in other major sending areas.

Similarly to the debates observed just a few years ago about the extension of voting rights to nationals abroad, sending states' involvement in the area of social protection however touches a series of important normative questions: Is sending state involvement encouraging the disengagement of receiving states' to extend access to social protection for migrants? Do sending states' programmes and support offered to citizens abroad reinforce or weaken welfare programmes for non-migrants in the home country? Are these policies just a symbolic token to make sure that 'loyal migrants' continue to send remittances back home? As migrants' access to social protection continues to be at the forefront of migration discussions in the coming years, these questions will undoubtedly feed heated debates in sending and receiving societies across the globe.