

The COVID-19 pandemic on anti-immigration and xenophobic discourse in Europe and the United States

La pandemia del COVID-19 en el discurso antimigratorio y xenóforo en Europa y Estados Unidos

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Abstract

In the last decades, anti-immigration discourse had been growing in some European countries and the United States. Migration as a problem was already a recurring argument in migration guidelines in some national states and it was also a political flag for right-wing formations. The objective of this research is to analyze how the health contingency by COVID-19 has influenced the political discourse on immigration. The investigation was based on a hemerographic review, including information from newspapers, news agencies and international organizations, carried out from March to September 2020. The results obtained from this research suggest that the pandemic has strengthened the anti-immigration positions, since it offers a manichean argument which might encourage xenophobic feelings and actions in the host societies.

Keywords: COVID-19, anti-immigration discourse, United States, Europe, migration policy, pandemics, border.

Resumen

El discurso antimigratorio en algunos países europeos y en Estados Unidos había estado escalando en las últimas décadas. La migración como problema ya era un argumento recurrente en las directrices migratorias de algunos Estados nacionales y una bandera de las formaciones políticas de derecha. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la manera en que la contingencia sanitaria derivada del COVID-19 ha influido sobre el discurso migratorio de los representantes políticos. Con base en la revisión hemerográfica de periódicos, agencias de noticias y organismos internacionales, entre marzo y septiembre de 2020, esta investigación muestra que la pandemia ha reforzado

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el discurso político antimigratorio, dado que ofrece un argumento maniqueo que puede favorecer sentimientos y actitudes xenófobos en las sociedades receptoras.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, discurso antimigratorio, Estados Unidos, Europa, política migratoria, pandemias, frontera.

Introduction

A few years ago, Dutch philosopher Rob Riemen (2017) warned about the way in which some of the less fortunate irrational emotions of human beings were making their way into European societies. He explained that resentment, hatred, xenophobia and fear had been prioritized in the discourse of far-right populist movements and are permeating the collective imagination. For the author, this does not signify the emergence of novel approaches but the return of doctrines that will inevitably lead, from further escalation, to despotism and violence. In a climate of fear derived from the sense of crisis, economic insecurity and the threat of terror, these movements will be able to increase their capacity for consolidation, a risks that can occur in any part of the world, although they can often go unnoticed in their early forms or are simply minimized, as Riemen appropriately warns of in his reflections.

These manifestations cannot operate without visible enemies, and international migrants become an ideal target of these feelings. Ayhan Kaya (2017) argues that, in general, populist discourses related to immigration are based on the Manichean notion that polarizes society by distinguishing between *us* and *them* through capitalizing or spreading economic and cultural resentment. This is when social identity becomes an instrumental function, in the words of Amartya Sen (2000). That is, identity is the instrument that establishes the boundaries of who can be beneficiaries of the social good, and *they* are generally the last link.

Both in Europe and in the United States, although not exclusively, anti-immigration discourse has gradually gained ground (Halimi, 2019; Kaya, 2017; Oroza & Puente, 2017; Raines et al., 2017; Streeck, 2019; Vereza, 2018). Recently, there have been various demonstrations from right-wing populist parties and movements¹ against migrants and refugees. Likewise, attempts by the United States government to implement increasingly tight immigration control policies are becoming more frequent (Arango et al., 2017).

At the beginning of March 2020, in response to the increase in cases of contagion worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the new coronavirus a pandemic and, with it, natural restrictions on mobility. Several countries adopted border restrictions early on, which suspended many people's international trips. By mid-March, 93 countries had already closed their borders vertiginously (Pedroza,

¹ While the term *populism* is controversial in the social sciences and political theory because it can be very vague and because of its overuse in the public sphere (Ungureanu & Serrano, 2019), this article considered its use relevant, as it is a recurring term in the academic literature consulted throughout this work. In this context, it is used to name right-wing political organizations with xenophobic and authoritarian tendencies.

2020). In addition, international health authorities recommended prioritizing trips that were considered essential: cases of emergency, humanitarian and repatriation activities, as well as those related to the supply of basic goods (Organización Mundial de la Salud [OMS], 2020).

However, there is a very thin line between the recommended restrictions and the instrumental use of the COVID-19 pandemic as an archetypal argument to attribute to international migration all types of threats to the security of states. The rhetoric of some government leaders and certain political movements is aimed at constructing a discourse, often forced and poorly structured, of the role that international migrations have in the global pandemic. In Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Hungary and Greece, to exemplify some European countries, and in the United States, the coronavirus has recently been used by different governments or political movements as a central argument against immigration.

Following the path of a recurring Manichean idea of international migration, efforts by national governments to incorporate restrictive migration guidelines are on the rise. By appealing to the dangers that migrants could represent to health, the economy and security, in the context of a pandemic, the network of anti-migration voices are resonating and finding justification. Fortunately, the counterpart has also made itself heard: with signs of solidarity from different sectors of society, we have sought to tip the balance towards more measured positions, where the fundamental role of migrants in the economy in the midst of contingency is revealed, including their occupation in high-risk health jobs.

Derived from the above, the objective of this article is to analyze how health contingency has influenced the political discourse on immigration. In the following pages, in addition to the methodological issues, three sections are presented that cover the same number of time horizons in which this article is structured. The first analyzes recent antimigratory and xenophobic discourses in Europe and the United States prior to the outbreak of the pandemic on the world stage. Here, we present how migration guidelines, as well as the discourse of some political movements, were already increasing their level of hostility and antipathy towards the migration phenomenon before the pandemic. The next section analyzes the discourses and migration policies in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the way in which the health contingency is reinforcing the anti-immigrant discourse is presented and is placed as the leading argument targeting migration as the problem. In the third section, and as a conclusion, the reader is offered some scenarios on the perspectives of migration policies in the years to come, where the possibilities of the pandemic's permanent place in the antimigratory discourse are analyzed.

Methods

Given the recent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the limited production of academic literature on the subject, this work was based on a newspaper and news agency analysis. These sources of information allowed us to have a current picture of the different political discourses that link the COVID-19 pandemic with international

migratory movements. Specifically, the briefing notes published in digital format by 15 media outlets in the United States and Europe were monitored. In the analysis, special attention was given to the objectivity and accuracy of the political discourses found, as well as the possibility of confirming the information. Similarly, ten reports and yearbooks of international organizations addressing the issue were considered. Notably, the academic literature on the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and international migration was extremely scarce during the period analyzed due to the newness of the subject.

The time horizon of this review began with the WHO's declaration of a pandemic in March 2020 and ended in September of the same year. In this period, approximately 40 mentions of the relationship between COVID-19 and international migration were detected, expressed by political leaders in the United States and in European countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Malta, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Serbia, Poland, Croatia and the United Kingdom. These regions were selected because anti-immigration political discourses have gained ground in these countries, as mentioned in the introduction of this work.

Recent trends in migration policies and anti-migration discourse

Contemporary international migrations are a cardinal part of the processes of globalization that have intensified since the 1970s. In virtually all regions of the world, population movements have had a great variety of economic and social consequences, which have become central to the domestic and international policy of nation states (Castles & Miller, 2004). Although international migrations *per se* are not new, some of the characteristics of contemporary migrations are.

One of the main changes with respect to those that preceded them is that traditional host societies such as Australia, Canada and the United States drastically increased the volume of their flows; at the same time, the origin of migration ceased to be primarily Europe but instead Asia, Africa and Latin America (Castles & Miller, 2004). Similarly, Europe was transformed relatively quickly into a continent receiving immigrants (Massey et al., 2000). In addition to its global nature, the increase in volume and the transformation of origins and destinations, other trends of contemporary migrations are that they are increasingly diversified in terms of the profile of migrants, they have been gradually feminized and what they mainly occupy in this article: they have an increasingly important political burden (Castles & Miller, 2004).

According to data from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas [DAES-ONU], 2019), it is estimated that international migrants in the world increased from 153 000 000 in 1990 to more than 271 000 000 in 2019, that is, an increase of 77.5%. This unprecedented surge in global migration flows has brought with it multiple challenges in the countries involved amid heated political debates. Regarding the cases concerning us in this article, the United States and Europe are where international migrants have increased continuously in the last three decades.

In North America, most of the flows have been directed to the United States: in 2019, the US welcomed 86.4% of the migrants in the region. For the same year, immigrants represented approximately 15% of the total population of the United States. On the European continent, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain are the countries that account for the largest number of immigrants. In the case of the European Union, Thomson (2015) indicates that more than one in ten people were immigrants, illustrating the magnitude of the phenomenon.

Derived from this statistical panorama, it is evident that the intensity of international population movements is a very complex issue. European countries are learning, practically on the fly, to manage the arrival of international migrants, something they have had to carry out immersed in a debate between their pros and cons.

As Münz et al. (2006) point out, international migration has helped establish a more efficient economy and labor market in Europe. In the same sense, the International Organization for Migration (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM], 2018) indicates that in host societies, migration improves national income, raises the average standard of living, and helps to correct imbalances in the labor market, especially in those positions where there is a shortage of local labor. Additionally, in the United States, Delgado (2016) notes the contribution that immigrants have made to the growth of the economy, where an important part of the growth of gross domestic product (GDP) can be attributed to this population group. However, notably, these benefits are due in large part to a segmentation of labor markets because a large number of immigrants remain in jobs with low wages and with little prospect of promotion (Massey et al., 2000).

However, given the current economic conditions, the debate on migration is far from adopting this positive approach; in contrast, it is perceived as exclusively negative (Thomson, 2015), which is often due to the volatility of migration policies. This is the bipolar logic that Jorge Durand (2017) speaks of: when the economy grows, immigrants are considered the perfect solution, being a cheap, hard-working and efficient labor force; however, when the economy shrinks, immigrants become an unnecessary and disposable burden.

In the case of the European Union, it is a discourse that holds immigrants responsible for many of the problems (Oroza & Puente, 2017). In fact, the management of the so-called migration and refugee crisis in Europe has focused on securitization and increasingly restrictive migration policies (Foundation for European Progressive Studies [FEPS], Global Migration Group, 2020). As an example, the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck (2019) argues that the most important reason why the British voted to abandon the European project is closely related to the immigration issue. It was, he warns, the result of resentment on the part of society regarding labor policies associated with migration.

In the United States, the situation is not very different: following the economic crisis of 2007, during the administration of President Barack Obama, immigration control policies were tightened, which had among its main consequences an increase in mass deportations. In the case of Mexicans alone, they accounted for more than 2 000 000 deportations (Delgado, 2016). As expected, given the campaign promises of President Donald Trump, the situation for international migrants was not rosy. As Peña (2017) explains, his government immediately proposed a dual-focus immigration

control strategy. During the first 30 days of his administration, he signed two executive orders for immigration control: the first sought to expand the capacity of action of the authorities operating on the border and the construction of the famous border wall; with the second, he tried to reinforce the externalization of immigration control, that is, to take it beyond the borders of the United States. In the following months, as Verea (2018) points out, Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric was the common denominator in his policies, based on the criminalization of immigrants, a reduction in the number of refugees, the separation of families at the borders and the adoption of an aggressive stance in sanctuary cities.

The central issue at this point in the article is to reflect on where antimigratory and xenophobic discourse originates, which leads to tougher control and social integration policies. Far from single-causal simplifications, the academic literature has emphasized various factors that attempt to elucidate the nature of positions reluctant to migration. Perhaps the first cause of these trends is rooted in economic factors: the restructuring of the international economy, initiated in the 1970s as a result of the Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis, has been considered by several sectors of society as a threat to their socioeconomic conditions, risks that are often related to the arrival of international migrants (Arango, 2003; Castles & Miller, 2004). In both conservative and progressive governments, the application of neoliberal formulas in the economy has generated thousands of unemployed people who find in the migrant, *in the other*, the origin of their problems and fears (Brieger, 2019).

In this way, anti-immigration discourses have resonated in some sectors of society by capitalizing or fostering economic resentment and social frustration, where migrants are perceived as a burden on the economy and social security systems (Kaya, 2017). In the cases of the United States and Europe, international migration in contexts of low economic expansion has reinforced attitudes of fear and rejection of migrants, who are presented by some political movements as the main group responsible for unemployment among the local population (Morlino & Russo, 2020). In Europe, there is even a propensity to dehumanize and criminalize migrants, who are seen as scapegoats for economic and social problems (FEPS, Global Migration Group, 2020). In the case of the United States, during Donald Trump's presidency, his rhetoric was supported by many disgruntled citizens, who feel the presence of immigrants is the cause of most of their economic difficulties (Verea, 2018).

In the French case, the economic reform established more than three decades ago, economic stagnation and mass unemployment have led to social precariousness, which materializes as attacks against pensions, housing subsidies, higher education and health. In this environment of economic insecurity, discourses against social welfare to foreigners and open-door migration policies are strengthened. In France, public discontent has become fuel for anti-immigration positions founded on searching for someone to blame to justify economic problems, vehemently raised by the extreme right-wing political movement National Rally (Agrupación Nacional), a direct heir to Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (Halimi, 2019). The above logic also explains the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, known as *Brexit*, which was closely related to the perception that immigration and European integration were a threat to the welfare state (Raines et al., 2017).

However, the economic argument does not have all the ties to sustain the anti-immigration discourse. It requires a second equally important factor: culture. As stated by Kaya (2017), the economic concerns of the population in anti-immigrant positions

are not exclusively based on economic grievances. Hostility towards immigration is combined with fear that poses a cultural and even ethnic threat. In the same sense, Oroza and Puente (2017, p. 8) suggest that the consequences of the economic crisis have reinforced racist, xenophobic and intolerant ideas, and to exemplify, the authors take the words of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who at the beginning of the migration crisis stated "... our country must defend our borders from people who were raised in another religion and represent a radically different culture".

Another sign that economic factors are not sufficient is found in Nordic countries, where right-wing populist parties have strengthened in a context of relative economic equality. For example, in Norway, a country that has been less affected by financial crises, with low levels of unemployment and where the welfare state continues to prevail, political movements such as the Progress Party have strengthened, reluctant to international migration, and that has influenced the implementation of restrictive and discriminatory policies, in which there is even talk of an Islamization of the country (Alseth, 2018; Nielsen, 2019).

In this regard, Rob Riemen expresses a special concern for the European case, considering that the idea of multiculturalism is not being managed easily. He synthetically and assertively states that "the United States at least knows how to deal with multiculturalism because it is a country based on immigration, on the famous melting pot, while Europeans do not have the remotest idea of how to handle this issue" (Cayuela, 2009). A year later, even German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had favorable positions on immigration, asserted that the concept of a multicultural Germany society had failed and immigrants had to do more to integrate because those who did not immediately learn German would not be welcome (Merkel asegura que la Alemania multicultural ha fracasado, 2010).

This is magnified in a context where there are clear rejections of many sectors to a multicultural society, where the toughening of political positions regarding immigrants is called for. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party proposes in its electoral program the closure of borders to protect the country from the arrival of unskilled migrants, the creation of a special force to protect border limits, and the elimination of the right to asylum and opposes that the children of immigrants born in Germany have the right to nationality (Müller, 2017).

In the case of the United States, giving credence to the words of Riemen, it is clear that multiculturalism cannot be described as easily managed either. The accommodation of diversity is not easily managed. It is not even in traditional host societies such as in the United States and Canada, where migratory movements have been an essential mechanism in nation-building, says Joaquín Arango (2003). It is enough to recall the words of Samuel Huntington (2004) in his controversial text *El desafío hispano (The Hispanic Challenge)*, suggesting that Mexican immigration to the United States was capable of endangering Anglo-Protestant culture. The anti-migration rhetoric of President Donald Trump disturbed the international community because he implemented very severe immigration control policies and caused social division through the promotion of a racist and xenophobic discourse. As examples, on the one hand, Trump labeled Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals; on the other hand, he directly linked Muslims to terrorism, with inflammatory rhetoric about Islam (Kaba, 2019).

Thus, it is possible to pose cultural arguments as a way to qualify racist and xenophobic expressions. As Castles and Miller (2004, p. 55) mention, “As ideas of racial superiority lose ideological strength, practices of exclusion against minorities focus more on the issues of cultural differences”, that is, an antimigratory discourse that hides racist and xenophobic feelings. For the same reasons, these arguments can transcend to the young second- and third-generation migrants and even affect other ethnic minorities unrelated to migration. For example, in 2015, the then President of France, François Hollande, declared that it was advisable to strip a person of French nationality for a violation of the interests of the nation, even if he was born French, if he had another nationality (Halimi, 2019).

Coupled with economic and cultural factors are political elements, particularly those related to the construction and conception of the nation-state. This form of organization is based precisely on the care of social interests based on shared cultural characteristics, such as language, religion, customs, and even physical typologies. Thus, the nation-state is founded on the sovereignty of political institutions over a territory and on regulating those people with shared histories, symbols and characteristics who may be eligible to enjoy their economic, political and social benefits. This is the initial barrier that migrants must overcome, as they are considered nonnationals (Vega-Macías, 2018). That is, in the nation-state, internal social and cultural differentiation is consolidated as a national unit based on the construction of absolute limits (Kearney, 2003).

In this sense, the nation-state is key to understanding the emergence of anti-immigrant arguments, given that the territory is a limited space, appropriated and valued by the social group, where the reproduction and satisfaction of their vital needs is ensured (Giménez, 2001). For these reasons, the integrity of the nation-state is opposed to a common government in the case of Europe, or the market economy and capitalism is demanded as exclusively national and is openly hostile towards globalization,² and the notion of one land, one people, is confronted with a multicultural society (Camus, 2019).

It is evident that these equations are a very valuable input in electoral strategies and calculations. This discourse is, then, raised by nationalist political movements, which find migration a political flag that fits their ideals, especially when it is perceived by sectors of society as an uncontrolled phenomenon directly affecting their interests. Raines et al. (2017), in a survey of 10 195 citizens in 10 European countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom), found that the refugee crisis started in 2015 and that immigration was considered among the top three failures of the European Union. Likewise, 44% perceived that immigration had a negative effect on their country; 38% rejected the opinion that it had enriched their cultural life; 51% stated that immigration had worsened crime; and 55% exerted pressure on the welfare state.

In the case of the United States, negative perceptions against migration have also increased in recent years. According to the Minority Rights and Relations survey (Jones & Saad, 2019), 23% of Americans considered international migration to be

² Joaquín Arango (2003) suggests the term *globalization* can be questionable when used in the context of international migration, as it refers, in particular, to the free movement of information, goods and capital; however, it is not the case with people's freedom of movement; therefore, the concept of *mondialization* may be more appropriate, as it limits it only to the global reach of migration.

the most important problem facing the country, the highest value recorded in the last three decades. However, it should be noted that according to the same survey, Americans still view immigration positively: 76% described it as something good for the country.

Consequently, it is not difficult to understand how these economic and social concerns are capitalized politically. The ability to exploit elements such as culture, identity, ethnicity, religion, past and immigration has been fundamental in the power grabs of right-wing populist parties in Europe through a mixture of economic and cultural resentment (Kaya, 2017). In fact, Stockemer (as cited in Raines et al., 2017) estimates that since the 1960s, the average percentage of votes of right-wing populist parties in national and European elections has increased from 5.1% to 13.2%, and its proportion of seats has tripled. In addition, the United States is not far off. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2019, p. 115), migration at the southern border was a central issue of the political campaign of Donald Trump. In this regard, the American sociologist wrote, "It is likely that his incessant harsh comments towards Mexico and the Mexicans have won him more popular support than any other issue and therefore ended up winning him the presidency". From the unusually aggressive perspective of Durand (2017), the narrative articulation and ideological discourse against immigrants in the United States have recently led to successful electoral policy and new anti-immigration legal systems.

It has been discussed throughout this section how the increase in global migration flows has been accompanied by an increasing political burden. The perception of some sectors of the population in Europe and the United States that this is an out-of-control phenomenon that threatens their living standards and their national identity is an increasingly frequent issue. These concerns are being incited and capitalized on by far-right political movements as a very valuable electoral asset that allows them to influence government action, where immigration and multiculturalism in their national projects are highly questioned. In March 2020, the WHO officially declared the new coronavirus a pandemic, and with this, a novel element emerged that could be used by populist rights to strengthen this xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourse. This topic will be addressed in the following sections.

Antimigratory discourse in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

In a framework of hostility towards international migration, the COVID-19 pandemic is used as a very convenient argument to reaffirm these antipathies. This situation stimulates the anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric of extreme right-wing groups in many countries. The global health emergency is being used by some governments to implement measures aimed at refugees, asylum seekers and migrants under the pretext of containing the spread of the virus (Zargar, 2020). Steven Erlanger (2020) is correct in stating that the coronavirus is not only spreading but is also infecting societies with a sense of insecurity, fear and fragmentation. In addition, he feels that narratives contrary to population movements have historically included metaphors of invasions and the formulation of theories based on migrants as disease carriers that

can be brought to light at this time. In agreement with the author's point of view, it can be added that in the current health crisis, these arguments are in the crosshairs of extreme right-wing groups as an important element to question the migration phenomenon and to set fire to the debate about its potential harmful consequences in society.

Fernand de Varennes, special rapporteur of the United Nations on minority issues, presented a statement in which he mentioned that some groups and politicians were exploiting COVID-19-related fears in the discourse against the Chinese population and other minorities. He warned that verbal and physical attacks on Asian people had been reported, in which they were accused of spreading the virus. He even recounts that some politicians were asking to deny migrants access to health services (El coronavirus no puede usarse como excusa para atacar a las minorías, 2020).

Additionally, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, warned that the pandemic unleashed in many countries a wave of hatred and xenophobia in the search for scapegoats and the promotion of fear. In a statement, he called on governments to strengthen immunity against the hate virus. In particular, he noted that some government leaders and high officials directly or indirectly encouraged racism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant discourse, taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis. Guterres showed particular concern for Asians and their descendants, who had been the target of derogatory language in the media and in the statements of some politicians (Human Right Watch [HRW], 2020). The expressions of racism and xenophobia have spread across several European countries and in the United States, where similar hate-speech against migrants is found, accusations that take advantage of the momentum that the economic and social situation derived from the pandemic can give them.

In Germany, discourses have been presented mainly by the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which brandishes a political propaganda that seeks to obtain electoral returns through an openly anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourse (Müller, 2017). AfD first entered the German Parliament in 2017 based on xenophobic rhetoric against the arrival of a million refugees. Although there has been a retreat in support for the extreme right in Germany and migration has ceased to be so present in the German political agenda, the AfD has shown that it is confident that the socioeconomic havoc that the COVID-19 pandemic can cause will help to reposition their anti-immigration discourse (Bennhold, 2020; Carbajosa, 2020).

The discussion in France on the relationship between the pandemic and migration has advanced more intensely. In the midst of a health crisis, the leader of the political party Agrupación Nacional, Marine Le Pen, inaugurated in early September 2020, is campaigning for regional and departmental elections in 2021 and for the presidential election in 2022, with security as the central issue. And, of course, migration could not be missing in her equation. In her proposals, she considers that the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accelerator of the French shipwreck in terms of security. In this regard, Le Pen attributed much of the security problems to "the anarchic and uncontrolled immigration imposed on the French for years, so offered her potential voters 'a firm, determined and implacable response'" against migration (Le Pen apoya su discurso electoral en una política de seguridad "implacable", 2020, para. 4).

In the same vein, months ago, Marine Le Pen blamed migrants for being primarily responsible for spreading the coronavirus. She asserted that "in some places [foreigners] have not respected confinement" and criticized that "masks were distributed in

refugee centers and not in nursing homes” (Baelo, 2020, para. 6). Another indicator of this anti-immigrant rhetoric is that the National Association of France was the first political movement to request the closure of borders and to criticize the reaction of the European Union in handling the epidemic (Gil, 2020).

In Italy, one of the countries most affected initially by the pandemic, xenophobic and antimigratory discourses have also been present in the public debate on the spread of COVID-19 and its consequences. As reported by the English journalist and writer Robert Fisk (2020), at the beginning of March 2020, Paolo Serpi, the Italian ambassador in Dublin, surprised the world with his statements claiming that Italy had been the first European country affected on a large scale by the pandemic due to the Chinese population dedicated to the textile industry in the north of the country. However, the evidence soon discounted this correlation because the neighborhoods they were living in did not show atypical epidemiological behavior. In contrast, adds Fisk, this population group showed greater civic involvement concerning the pandemic.

Likewise, as HRW (2020, para. 6) reported, the governor of the Veneto region took this discourse even further at the beginning of the pandemic. He stated - with a subsequent apology - that Italy was better prepared than China to face the pandemic, for the following reasons, in his own words: “the hygiene that our people have, (...) the cultural habits that we have, of showering, washing our hands very often (...), while we have all seen the videos of Chinese who eat live rats”.

In this sense, the most inflammatory and systematic migration hate-speech in Italy has come in recent years from the right-wing political leader Matteo Salvini, federal secretary of the Northern League (Lega Nord). However, during the pandemic, it seemed that his agenda shifted from immigration to the economy, perhaps because the three regions with the most infections and deaths in the country were governed by his party. In addition, immigration began to lose importance in the mood of public opinion during the pandemic (Verdú, 2020b). However, Salvini continues to claim that in many Italian cities, excessive immigration causes many social problems (Verdú, 2020a); therefore, occasionally he fuels his discourse on the relationship between migration and the pandemic by suggesting, for example, that migrants from Africa may have brought the virus with them (Zargar, 2020). Likewise, he considered that the region of Sicily was collapsing due to the invasion of illegal immigrants, who brought with them a boom in infections (Pianigiani & Bubola, 2020).

Additionally, in Italy, immigration discourse has particularly affected those seeking refuge. Since April 7, Italy decreed that while the pandemic lasted, Italian ports could not be considered safe places for the disembarkation of people rescued outside their search and rescue region (Amnesty International [AI], 2020). Likewise, the president of Sicily, the right-wing politician Nello Musumeci, ordered in August the closure of all migrant centers on the grounds that it was impossible to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Although a court blocked the initiative, the message was clear that right-wing politicians sought to revive the debate on immigration (Pianigiani & Bubola, 2020).

The Italian model was soon transferred to Malta, a country that closed its ports with the argument of needing to channel all resources to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Italy, it was declared an unsafe place to land.

As an example of the action of the Maltese authorities, Amnesty International has mentioned a case that it has defined as the “Easter Monday Pushback”, in which a commercial fishing boat hired by Malta rescued 51 migrants and refugees and unlawfully returned to Libya to hand them over to the authorities, exposing the group of refugees and migrants, who had just survived a deadly shipwreck, to more risks to their lives. (AI, 2020, p. 7)

In Greece, scarce evidence in the relationship between migratory flows and the COVID-19 pandemic invalidated the exploitation of the immigration issue as a vector of the disease, said political scientist Jean-Yves Camus, director of the Observatory of Political Radicalities (ORAP, for its initials in French). However, he states that the relationship was used by far-right parties mainly to denounce the lack of confinement in some neighborhoods with a high immigrant population, where the Muslim population mainly lives (La ultraderecha europea, escudada en la crítica y el complot ante la pandemia, 2020).

Additionally, in Spain, the right has used the relationship between immigration and the pandemic in a similar tone. Isabel Díaz Ayuso, politician of the People’s Party (PP) and president of the Community of Madrid, pointed out in September that the contagions in the southern districts of the city were due to the immigrant population. In the debate on the state of the region, the president affirmed, “Yes, indeed, [the contagions] are being produced, among other things, by the way of life of immigrants in Madrid”; however, in the same session, she tried backtracking, shifting the problem to overpopulation and overcrowding: “it is evident that the problem I speak of is not against migrants because the virus is fed with families living closer together, in smaller homes” (Viejo & Mateo, 2020, paras. 2 and 4). The above is a reflection of the immigrant discourse of the PP, which has historically projected a series of prejudices and stereotypes through highly manipulative rhetoric, through which migrants always appear negatively represented as a problem and a threat to the country (Rubio, 2010).

Vox, a Spanish far-right political party founded in 2013 and which has gradually grown in electoral preferences, seeks to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen its anti-immigrant discourse. In March, it unsuccessfully proposed that during the health contingency, irregular immigrants should be treated differently in public health. In addition, it proposed that the stay of irregular foreigners in detention centers, which is legally limited to 60 days, could be extended to the duration of the health contingency and, if this were not enough, they would be expelled from Spain at the end of the quarantine (González, 2020). In June, the Vox parliamentary spokesman, Iván Espinosa, appealed to illegal immigrants: “the message has to be very clear for all immigrants who are thinking of arriving in Spain. Do not come, we cannot welcome you, it is a reality”, and this, curiously, he expressed in Spanish, English and French so that his message would reach more immigrants (Vox alerta a los inmigrantes que quieren venir a España por el ingreso mínimo: “No hay dinero para todos”, 2020, para. 5).

A few weeks later, Juan Luis Steegmann, Vox’s spokesman on health issues, requested that the government strictly monitor nongovernmental organizations dedicated to the rescue or accompaniment of immigrants, as they encouraged illegal immigration and would “kill Spaniards through coronavirus infections”. He also asked “to conduct a border health examination of diseases such as coronavirus or tuberculosis, giving

appropriate treatment for immigrants (...) during the period in which their expulsion is being processed” (Vox, sobre las ONG de apoyo a inmigrantes: “Van a conseguir matar a los españoles a base de infecciones”, 2020, paras. 1 and 5).

In Hungary, the leader of the right-wing Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance party and current prime minister, Viktor Orbán, a regular defender of anti-immigrant discourse, quickly sought a way to link the pandemic to migration: “we are waging a war on two fronts. One front is called migration, and the other belongs to the coronavirus. There is a logical connection between the two because both are propagated by movement” (Rohac, 2020, para. 8). In addition, this speech was turned into an example with the well-known deportation from Hungary of 17 Iranian students from the Semmelweis University of Medicine, based on the alleged violation of quarantine measures during their isolation in a hospital in Budapest (Tissera, 2020). As part of the defense of his decision, Orbán argued that “(...) foreigners brought the disease, and it is spreading among foreigners” (Mutsvara, 2020, para. 6).

Similar expressions have also occurred in other parts of Europe. In Serbia, far-right parties have toughened their anti-immigration policies during the health crisis, threatening to expel nearly 6 000 migrants residing in the country (Zargar, 2020). In Poland, right-wing groups have argued that ethnic uniformity and nationalism are solutions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Colborne & Hajdari, 2020). In Croatia, the Minister of Health, Vili Beroš, said that migrants represent a potential risk in the spread of the virus (Zargar, 2020).

Finally, with regard to Europe, a contrary case is that of the United Kingdom, where most political forces have highlighted the essential work of migrants during the pandemic, who had recently been blamed for many of the economic and social problems. However, as a result of COVID-19, it was very difficult to question the contributions of migrants to public services, especially health services (Sanders, 2020). Since April, immigration practically disappeared from the political agenda, and in the media, the headlines began to praise immigrants for their contributions. As an example, the parliamentary groups requested that the visa be extended free of charge to foreign workers of the National Health Service (NHS), an initiative that Boris Johnson, leader of the Conservative Party and prime minister, decided to implement (Will COVID-19 change the UK’s attitudes towards immigration for good?, 2020).

In the United States, President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus”, potentially encouraging ethnic insults against the Asian population. For Tendayi Achiume, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, the use of a geographical name for this virus can promote racism and xenophobia (Deen, 2020). However, when the president was questioned in this regard, he merely answered that the virus came from China and that the expression was not racist at all (Coronavirus: Trump grilled on use of term “Chinese virus”, 2020). In addition, the United States government systematically tried to turn immigrants into scapegoats for their own failure in managing the pandemic, or they used it to promote anti-immigrant and racist policies. For example, Alex Azar, Health Secretary, affirmed in May that the lifestyle of the employees of the meat packing plants, mostly migrants and minorities, was what triggered the spread of the virus in these businesses (Hastings & Torres, 2020).

Donald Trump also used the virus as an excuse to accelerate his restrictions on immigration. For example, in June, he suspended the issuance of work visas for thousands of foreigners, from personnel in the technology sector and seasonal

workers in the hotel industry to nannies and students (Manjoo, 2020). In the United States, border closures and national withdrawal, by taking health security as a pretext against COVID-19, reinforce unilateral and nationalist tendencies and trivialize anti-immigration discourse (Ramonet, 2020).

By way of conclusion: perspectives of the persistence of the pandemic in antimigratory discourse

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in political, economic and social life at the global level, with an intensity that is unprecedented in recent decades, and international migrations have not been an exception. As such, this article focused on analyzing the way in which the health contingency has influenced the discourse of political representatives on immigration in Europe and the United States. A general overview of this research concludes that the antimigratory and xenophobic positions in these regions have been bolstered during the pandemic, mainly by the members of some right-wing political movements. Additionally, the results suggest that these positions can continue in the future and even intensify for the reasons presented to the reader in the following lines of thought.

Among the consequences of the pandemic are two issues that are imminent. First, the health crisis is expected to lead to one of the worst economic recessions in recent history, which will generate many economic challenges in the decades to come. As expected, its effects will be primed in the weakest economies, already vulnerable before the pandemic. According to the International Monetary Fund (Fondo Monetario Internacional [FMI], 2020), the GDP of emerging markets and developing economies (excluding China) fell by 5.7% in 2020 and is expected to grow by 5% in 2021; however, the projected rebound will not be enough to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Second, it is very likely that migration flows will be further motivated by unemployment and increasing inequalities. Although the factors leading to international migration are varied, the economic problems generated by the pandemic will critically influence the intensity of migration. It is true that during the pandemic the closure of borders has slowed migratory flows, but they will surely return and will do so with renewed vigor. During the first months of the pandemic, the European Union had a decrease in asylum applications and irregular entries; however, in some countries, this effect was temporary. For example, in 2020, irregular arrivals to Italy and Malta increased by 154%, and in the Spanish Canary Islands, they increased by 46% compared to the previous year. Importantly, most of these migrants were from countries affected by the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic and not so much by political and social conflicts (Comisión Europea, 2021). Something similar happened in the United States: after a period of stagnation due to the pandemic, the number of migrants detained at the southern border increased by 137% between March and July 2020; however, the numbers are still far from the levels recorded in 2019 (Semple, 2020).

In this context, the possibility of the COVID-19 pandemic embedding itself into future migration discourse indicates two contrasting scenarios. The first of these (the least likely according to the recent experience reported in this article) is that elements

of the pandemic emerge that steer a change in course in the antimigratory discourse. The health crisis put on the table the positive contribution that migration has on the economy as a whole and on essential services. As in the United Kingdom, one of the positive effects of the pandemic is that it highlights the essential work of migrants. Blaming unemployment on immigration, a basic argument of the right, is difficult to sustain when there has been dependence on foreigners in strategic sectors (González-Páramo, 2020; Pretel et al., 2020; Sanders, 2020). In fact, the pandemic and the focus on its management have meant that immigration has receded as a political concern and that the closure of borders and the suspension of free movement in Europe have robbed right-wing parties of their anti-immigration political niche (Dennison & Geddes, 2020). However, it is very likely that all of the above is only temporary.

In the second scenario, the pandemic will most likely be blamed for the failures of many public policies, some reasonable and others not. Those who have historically used international migrants as scapegoats for many social problems will not hesitate to bring to the fore the trinomial pandemic-migration-problem. It is foreseeable that when the economic effects of the pandemic are more intense, right-wing parties will have an updated migratory rhetoric ready to use for tightening policies of integration and migratory control or as a very effective electoral instrument.

Likewise, it is worrying that the pandemic could strengthen right-wing political movements with authoritarian tendencies, given that the health contingency has allowed governments to limit some freedoms (Aguirre, 2020). In the midst of a high risk to public health, most citizens, and rightly so, are willing to sacrifice freedoms, such as freedom of movement and freedom of assembly. However, in the name of public health, decisions are being made that in another context would be highly questioned. In some countries, the pandemic has given a wide berth to govern based on decrees with a clear absence of accountability and without limits to the exercise of power, which has weakened democratic institutions.

Authoritarians are more comfortable in troubled rivers, and the pandemic is shaking them impetuously. This is bad news for international migrants, among whom displacement and insertion into host societies may be increasingly difficult. With all their flaws, democratic systems have a moral obligation to migrants to provide them with a series of rights within their legal systems, and although the laws are far from solidifying a just social order and legal systems are going through a crisis of representation and credibility, laws are the minimum legal protection of human rights for this population group.

In this scenario, migration as a problem will continue to be a recurring argument of the so-called right-wing political formations, but not exclusively. This wing of the political spectrum has a head-on rhetoric against migration, even presented in unkind terms that the “‘uncomplexed right’ loves to lash out at the ‘politically correct’”, of which Serge Halimi speaks (2019, p. 34). This provocative style is very attractive among some sectors of the population. However, many governments and political organizations considered center or left have also toughened their positions towards economic migrants and refugees. It is true that the tone is more measured, but with often similar outcomes.

As Rob Riemen (2017, p. 44) points out, to expand their power, it is very likely that some political movements “will exploit resentment, point to scapegoats, incite hatred, and hide an intellectual vacuum under garish slogans and insults and will turn political opportunism into an art form”. In agreement with the above, the results

of this study suggest that the pandemic will leave a negative imprint on the most vulnerable international migrants, who will continue to be plagued by antimigratory and xenophobic discourses.

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