

The Prospects For An Immigration Agreement

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September 11 should favor rather than hinder a migratory accord.

The terrible events of September 11 in New York and Washington will have important repercussions in U.S. foreign policy. Probably, one will be interested in including Mexico in a security plan for North America and any hemisphere-wide proposal that may emerge. U.S. borders with its main trade partners must be efficient, orderly and secure. The need for greater regulation and control (not free transit) could favor instead of block negotiations of a migration agreement.

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Changes in U.S. priorities on the international level may affect the speed and form of an agreement, but will probably not change the need to solve the problem. President Fox's audacity in exerting pressure to come to an understanding by the end of this year sought to politically commit the Bush administration to not leaving the matter on the back burner, even given the complications it implies.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND SUSPICIONS

Even though a great many research results exist, analysts generally accept the notion that immigrants to industrial-

ized countries contribute significantly to their economies. The benefits, of course, are not distributed evenly and some sectors of the local population do compete with the recent arrivals. On the other hand, it has been found that the demand for immigrant labor in some regions of the United States has become “structural,” that is, considerably independent of “expelling” and “attracting” factors linked to economic cycles.

Evidence also exists of “cultural” patterns, including family and community networks that combine with the main stimulus for migration, the wage differential. It has been suggested that the key to solving the problem is a flexible migratory policy that would one way or another make it possible to regulate the flow in response to the needs of the labor market, anticipating its possible demographic effects. In the case of receiving countries, we should also consider the demand for public services in order to calculate appropriate responses.¹ In the long run, of course, the answer is a much smaller gap in development between Mexico and the United States; but in the short and medium term, perhaps the political and social reactions that generate migration are more delicate and difficult to assuage.

On the Mexican side, the consequences of U.S. efforts to reinforce border surveillance are matters for concern since they increase the —often fatal— hardships that potential illegal immigrants have to go through. There is also concern about protecting civil rights. In addition to the potential competition on the labor market, the Hispanic community worries that negative stereotypes about immigrants will foment discrimination and the viola-

tion of their own rights. It is difficult for U.S. society to appraise the economic benefits of Mexican immigration, above all when they perceive slow sociocultural assimilation, particularly due to the widespread use of the Spanish language, and the abrupt arrival to small and medium-sized communities unused to the presence of immigrants.² A recent study shows that the U.S. public opposes an increase in both legal and illegal immigration (although much more decidedly the latter), even in times of economic bonanza.³

THE ACTORS ON THE WINDING ROAD AHEAD

So, the difficulties for a migratory agreement are considerable. Mexico is already the main source of immigrants in the United States, both documented and undocumented. Mexican American congresspersons (part of the Hispanic caucus) are not united nor do they have political clout or the conviction to pressure for a large quota for legal immigration. On the other hand, the argument that an important reason for the Republicans and President Bush to commit themselves to an immigration agreement would be the possibility of increasing their share of the Hispanic vote is questionable and tricky. As former President Bush discovered when he tried to use the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a point in his favor, the Hispanic electorate is very diverse in composition and interests. Just like with NAFTA, immigration causes curious, complex alliances, such as that of pro-business Republicans, who emphasize the economic bene-

fits particularly of temporary migrant workers, and the large unions, who, in a surprising turn-about, see in legalization a potential increase in membership.

Of course, the Mexican government has hired new lobbyists in Washington and is willing to assume its responsibility as a country of transit. It is also stepping up efforts to smash gangs engaged in migrant trafficking nationwide and is seeking to improve the infrastructure and efficiency of its own migratory agencies. For example, through its “South Plan,” it hopes to achieve control over the border with Central America. And, in accordance with the idea of promoting development to mitigate migration, it has launched the Puebla-Panama Plan with ambitious aims, though modest means.

The challenge is to avoid repeating the problems and abuses that occur on the northern border. Mexico will be subject to the same criticisms leveled at the U.S. border patrol, other authorities and some private citizens about the treatment inflicted on Mexicans who want to be immigrants. All of these changes are taking place, of course, in the new democratic context of our country, which implies questioning the government and the need to come to agreements among different Mexican political actors.

Mexican and U.S. negotiators will have to find a way to come up with a first agreement based on the “lowest common denominator” that is politically acceptable. It seems improbable that they will be able to cover all the Mexican proposals on a first attempt (legalization of undocumented immigrants, the acceptance of temporary workers, more visas, putting an end to fatalities on the border, promoting

development in communities of origin, etc.). The new priorities for U.S. foreign policy, as well as the U.S. legislative calendar of domestic issues will determine the rhythm and breadth of the accords. The NAFTA negotiations took more than three years covering the terms of two U.S. presidents and stood in the background of the Gulf War.

We must continue to pay attention to the subtleties in language (the Bush administration talks of “regularization” not “legalization”; the Mexican government emphasizes not calling undocumented migrants “criminals”), seek out allies with similar interests and systematically build coalitions, probably step by step. We must inform and court U.S. legislators, particularly those with political weight, and convince a

good number of them that the economic benefits for their constituents are great enough to try to gradually overcome the reticence among sectors of their population to accept a greater and more evident ethnic and cultural diversity in their country.

The good will of the United States on this bilateral level, particularly about a priority pointed out by the Mexican government, will require political reciprocity internationally. Mexico will have to be consistent and assume its role as both partner and ally, without this necessarily meaning it will not continue to try to have manoeuvring room, even if only a little. When requested, Mexican support should be explicit though circumspect. Differences—as is only prudent—will have to be

diluted in collective positions. The window of opportunity for migration is open; it must be protected lest it be closed by a passing storm. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Demetrios G. Papademetriou, “Migration,” *Foreign Policy* 109 (winter, 1997-1998), pp. 20-22.
- ² These concerns are clear in work like that of James Goldsborough, “Out-of-Control Immigration,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 79, no. 5 (September-October 2000), pp. 89-101.
- ³ Thomas J. Espenshade and Mariann Belager, “Immigration and Public Opinion,” Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, comp., *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 366-367.