

# Chapter 13

## Latin American Transnational Political Engagement: Steering Civic Movements and Cultural Repertoires from the Global City of Brussels



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### 13.1 Introduction

Social scientists have a growing interest in how and why migrants are creating, transforming, and exploiting transnational networks to engage in political movements in both their home and host countries. In this regard, migration scholarship has contributed to understand different geographical spaces and actors involved in transnational political movements (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003); determining the profile of migrants participating and organizing political transnational activities (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Lafleur 2013) and studying the migrant's political integration and participation in the host country (Martiniello 2006).

One of the main criticisms of these approaches, however, is that migration scholars often focus on the political interests and opportunities available to migrants at a national scale. Indeed, Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011, p. 69) argued that cities are a better scale of analysis to unpack migrant practices, patterns of organization, and strategies of participation. Building on this idea, our aim is to answer the following questions in this chapter: how do global cities shape transnational fields of social mobilization? What is the nexus between the transnational fields of social

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mobilization and access to welfare states? How do cultural exchanges shape transnational social movements and civic initiatives?

Theoretically, in this chapter we introduce a spatial level of analysis to elucidate the dynamics of migrant social movements organized in global cities. By focusing on the city of Brussels, this article analyzes the impact of global cities in shaping the capacity and desire of Latin American migrants of engaging in political movements. Empirically, this chapter presents two case studies where Latin Americans living in Brussels engage in political transnational activities to change their living conditions, both in their host and home cities. The life stories narrated in this chapter highlight how cultural traditions, symbols, and practices from cultural repertoires enable minorities (Faist 2000) to become members of the civil society in Belgium.

In order to operationalize the practices used by migrants to construct transnational social fields of protest, we base our analysis on the concept of social remittances, coined by Peggy Levitt (1998, p. 927). This concept refers to the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow between receiving and sending communities (Faist 2008; Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). In addition, social remittances capture the feelings of nostalgia and hope, which were introduced as catalyzers of political movements in the introduction to this volume. Social remittances have a direct impact on the way migrants organize a range of transnational activities, such as collective initiatives, development projects, or political elections (Collyer 2014; Lafleur 2011; Morales and Giugni 2011). Indeed, the mobile and malleable nature of social remittances (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016) creates social, political, and cultural capital that migrants exploit in the city where they live.

In this chapter, we demonstrate that migrants accumulate political and cultural knowledge, symbols, and practices as a result of their emigration experience. Most particularly, we argue that social remittances shape the way migrants: (1) develop their political and cultural repertoires of contention; (2) constitute their social identities and networks, influencing their political behavior; and (3) embody the ideologies, ideas, and norms of their homeland, while being influenced by the multiple cities in which they have lived. In sum, social remittances aim to trace social interactions and networks sustained between, at least, two cities, that determine migrant's attitudes, behavior, and rationales.

In what follows, we first explain the importance of considering the concept of global city as the unit of analysis to study the composition and dynamics of the social fields of transnational political mobilization. This part underlines the impact of the global city's positionality and the economic, socio-cultural, and political factors available within them, which structure the opportunities for migrants to engage in transnational political movements. In the second part, we present the specificities of Brussels as a Global City and as a key arena for protests. In the third and fourth parts of this chapter, we examine two main areas of politics, which have been of interest to Latin American migrants in Brussels. The first example introduces the advocacy efforts of protest that Latin Americans have made in relation to the Belgian welfare state and their access to social protection, whereas the second example

focuses on the efforts made by Latin Americans to spur political changes in their home countries.

In this chapter we present evidence collected through ethnographic work, including biographical interviews and participant observation (Bayard De Volo 2009). The ethnographic approach is a useful method for uncovering the processes, meanings, emotions, and interests that sustain and motivate social groups to engage in political activism (Herbert 2000). Moreover, ethnography allows researchers to study populations, whose voices are not well represented in the dominant discourse (Bayard De Volo 2009, p. 227).

## 13.2 Scaling Transnational Fields of Mobilization from a Global City

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2008) define social fields as “networks of networks that may be locally situated or extend nationally or transnationally”. Thus, transnational social fields are conceived as multidimensional matrices of interactions, which transcend geographical boundaries and distances (Bermudez 2010; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Based on this definition, we conceptualize transnational fields of mobilization as social fields in which the exchanges, interactions, and resources exploited have the purpose to challenge and reorient political and social structures. As a result, we conceive transnational social fields of mobilization as multidimensional spaces where migrants: (1) find political opportunities, cultural capital, and resources to protest and organize civic movements; (2) develop networks and strategies of contention; (3) feed their ideologies, sense of belonging, and grievances; and (4) boost their motivations and evaluate the outcomes of their political engagement (Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010). In other words, transnational fields of mobilization are abstract spaces where migrants exchange information, ideas, skills, and resources to engage and coordinate transnational political and social protests. However, it is important to recognize that these spaces are physically sustained and fed by active members of the civil society, mostly living in cities. As a result, cities act as nodes where the signals and interactions originate, arrive, and transform.

The dynamics and opportunities available in cities vary depending on their density, local infrastructure, economy, and global positionality (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011). Therefore, urbanists and geographers distinguish between cities and global cities. Global cities are dense urban clusters characterized by wealth disparities, a shrinking middle class, immigration, and slum production, uneven access to services and the creation of private spaces and networks (Curtis 2011). Indeed, these strategic territories have some particularities that influence their role as centers of transnational fields of mobilization.

The first particularity of global cities is its abundant economic, political, social, and cultural capital. The combination of historical and opportunity factors makes

global cities poles of attraction for migrants, international actors, governments, and nationals from smaller cities (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011, p. 69). Consequently, global cities become highly dense multicultural spaces, where people interact by navigating multiple social codes and exploiting varied political resources.

The second particularity of global cities, directly affecting the transnational fields of social mobilization, is its positionality in the international regime. Global cities are dense hubs of information, communication, and competition (Sassen 2005). However, not all global cities are equally dynamic and powerful on an international level. Global cities are hierarchically classified, in relation to the level of their capital flow, political symbolism, and legitimacy in the international regime.

The third relevant element to consider unpacking the nexus between transnational social fields of mobilization and global cities is the repertoires of contention and forms of political protest. Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 183) argue that repertoires and strategies of protest change from state to state. On the same line, but rescaling the level of analysis to cities, it is possible to argue that the politics of contention and strategies of political protest vary from one global city to another. Indeed, the local context, traditions of contention, and availability of opportunities for protest are unique to each global city. Finally, by rescaling the study of migration to the city level, we aim to contribute to the better understanding of the nexus between local dynamics, local political opportunities, and transnational political movements. In the next sections, we provide further details on each of these characteristics, in order to understand how Brussels, as a global city, can have a predominant role in migrant transnational activism, both in the receiving and sending societies.

### 13.2.1 *Brussels the Global City*

According to Smith (2005), the practices of engagement of individuals must be contextualized in translocal settings. The interviewees in this study are based in the global city of Brussels. Brussels is a multicultural, officially bilingual city according to Article 4 of the Belgian constitution (Dutch, French), situated in Belgium, a multi-layered federal state, and an immigrant nation with a colonial past. Brussels is a core city in terms of communication, technology, and as principal seat of different international and European institutions. Brussels is one of Europe's and Belgium's most diverse cities, with regard to nationalities<sup>1</sup>. In Brussels (*Brussel* in Dutch; *Bruxelles* in French), competing communitarian (Flemish-French) monocultural structures coexist in a pluri-ethnic urban setting, each governing the arts, the cultural sector, and immigration and integration policies from within separate government bodies (Adam and Martiniello 2013). Moreover, it currently holds

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, 411,000 of Brussels' residents where non-Belgians, 23% of them where EU citizens and 12% came from a third country (Hermia and Sierens 2017, p. 2). In 2016, 182 nationalities were represented in Brussels (BISA 2017).

44.5% of the total foreigner population in Belgium (Lafleur and Marfouk 2017, p. 30). The city embodies the challenges and possibilities that come with diversity in a modern urban center with over one million inhabitants (Walravens 2015).

In this context, migrants face both predicaments and opportunities to become politically active. In Brussels, the laws of settling and admission that affect migrants' political participation are set by the Federal Belgian state, whereas the programs for the integration and emancipation of ethno-cultural minorities are governed separately by the French and Dutch-speaking communities (European Commission 2013)<sup>2</sup>. Traditionally, the perception of migrants in Brussels has been affected by historical international and internal mobilities, the increasing life expectancies, and declining fertility rates, among the so-called native (*autochtone*) population (Adam and Martiniello 2013; Costanzo and Zibouh 2013), as well as different Walloon and Flemish ideologies. The Walloon influence in Brussels, with the support of the French-speaking community commission (COCOF), has remained *laissez-faire*, while the Flemish community has become more interventionist. However, both sides have adopted assimilationist initiatives that include mandatory integration courses as prerequisite for naturalization<sup>3</sup> (Adam and Martiniello 2013). The European Union mottos of integration and social cohesion for all third country nationals have also influenced these policies (Adam and Martiniello 2013).

Historically, in Belgium, migrants have been considered as temporary visitors, whose mobility is guided by various economic and social reasons and shaped by governmental institutions (Martiniello and Rea 2003). For instance, the closure of the coalmine employment programs in the 1950s, and later in the 1970s, the guest worker programs led to the theoretical closure of borders and family reunification laws (Martiniello and Florence 2005)<sup>4</sup>. However, Belgium has continued to be an immigrant country, now with a more diverse foreign population. Latin Americans are part of a small recent minority with several profiles, varying from those that arrived in the 1970s and 1980s as political refugees, to more recent migrants that arrived for economic reasons in the late 2000s, along with a new category of onward migrants that have arrived from other European southern countries, where they had settled before (Vivas-Romero 2017). In terms of gender, women represent 60% of Latin Americans officially registered in Belgium (DEMO 2015).

The Belgian popular discourse has often ignored the role of migrants, both culturally and politically in urban centers (Martiniello and Rea 2003). However, the 9/11 attacks in the US triggered feelings of insecurity and fear of the "other" that forced cultural and political authorities to publicly debate the participation of ethnic

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<sup>2</sup>With the creation of the Brussels Capital Region, the French Community Commission (*Commission Communautaire Française*, COCOF) and the Flemish Community Commission (*Vlaams Gemeenschapscommissie*, VGC) became the designated authorities over integration policies and programs in the city.

<sup>3</sup>See, <http://www.allrights.be/node/491>. Accessed 5 Nov 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Historically, in spite of the government's attempt to persuade certain immigrants to return to their country of origins, immigrants and their offspring remained in Belgium, in fact the official ban to recruit new qualified foreign workers was not successful either.

minorities in the city's cultural and political life (Martiniello 2013). Thus, migrants and non-migrants lead their political activism on to challenging but stimulating grounds.

Our interviewees have not been immune from the aforementioned context; however, they have challenged their countries of origin and of destination by contesting exclusionary or assimilationist policies. Migrants were in fact even more prompted to participate politically, as welfare policies became a tool to control migration. A clear example of this was the case of Southern European migrants, who according to Lafleur and Mescoli (2018), were obliged to provide proofs of their financial stability and their non-dependence on the Belgian welfare state in order to reside in Belgium. When migrants face these policies, they become active from within their different positions in the city. Some migrants are what Martiniello (2004) has described as full citizens with full political and economic rights. Evidently, the spaces for protest and engagement are large, but sometimes these spaces are affected by the ethnicity, gender, or social class of migrants. Others are categorized as denizens with certain political and social rights at a city level (Martiniello 2004), but lacking the rights to vote in federal or European elections, as well as access to supranational EU rights (Martiniello 2000). In the least privileged position are "margizens", with barely any political or social rights. They do not have a set migratory status and can only access healthcare in Brussels in case of an emergency. According to Faist (2001), migrants' loyalty, levels of political participation, and engagement increase as they advance in their status in the welfare state as political subjects.

### 13.2.2 *Methods*

The data we present in this chapter is drawn from two doctoral projects conducted in the city of Brussels. The first project consists of a multi-sited ethnography investigating the global social protection arrangements of migrant domestic workers. Through participant observation and life story interviews, this project collected data of the coping strategies of 15 women followed for over 35 months. The interviewees were selected through an analytical sample technique, according to their gender roles, race (women from the Andean region with multiple ethnic origins), class, education level, religion, and generational standpoints. Although their political engagement was not the first object of study, it became a parallel aim as the women in the study became conscious of their inclusion in the welfare state—or lack of thereof—and decided to engage in the political arena of the city.

The second project examines the transnational political participation of Mexican migrants in the city of Brussels. Similarly, the researcher followed 24 migrants engaged in social and political movements for 26 months. The semi-structured interviews conducted with these key informants were complemented with participant observation at 42 events organized by Mexican migrants including: political demonstrations, music rehearsals, charity concerts, gastronomic and artistic

festivals, political debates, and film screenings. Through the detailed observation of these events, it was possible to identify the dynamics catalyzing and sustaining extra-territorial political activities. Furthermore, it was possible to identify the personal motivations, feelings of hope and nostalgia, and expectations of Mexican migrants, that create transnational fields of social protest.

Both cases use ethnography and participant observation. These methods allow following, in real time, the processes migrants have to go through in order to engage in politics in their home and host societies (Herbert 2000). Additionally, the life story interviews helped us to see, at a micro-level of experience, how migrants relate their experiences to macro-structures of opportunities and constraints.

In the past months, we examined the data from both research projects and found patterns of political mobilization that Latin American migrants use to challenge the welfare state and the political systems in their host city (Brussels), and in the cities of their countries of origin. By focusing on their social remittances, particularly the transfer of information, ideas, skills, and resources, we identified that the transnational social fields of mobilization deployed by Latin American in Brussels, are directly influenced by the personal experiences, political behavior, ideologies, rationales, nostalgia, and social capital migrants have accumulated throughout their lifetime, prior to their migration and since their arrival in their host society.

The following sections present two examples of how Latin American migrants living in Brussels have created their own transnational fields of social mobilization. These cases show that Latin Americans base their transnational fields of social mobilization on the availability of capacities and opportunities manifested in a continuum between in Brussels and their home cities.

### **13.3 Challenging One's Place in the Belgian Welfare State: From the Global City of Brussels**

Juana is a political refugee who arrived in Brussels in the early 1980s. She began her political engagement as a young woman, when she became involved in political activism to protest against the political violence in her country of origin. Juana comes from Peru, a familial welfare state, where citizens mostly rely on informal networks of support to obtain private social protection resources (Martinez-Franzoni 2008). Historically, women like Juana, who come from indigenous origins have suffered the deficiencies of governments, which have not always provided them with spaces for protest. In this sense, in the words of Rivera herself (2013), the Peruvian state has very few citizens with full political rights. The latter are, in the most part, only male and live in the country's biggest cities. Juana, thus filled with nostalgia, often praised the Belgian state:

Obviously, the system has its weakness but the social system they [Belgians] have is unique. And you know it once you know the laws, when you know institutions well enough. I mean everything the social system gives you [...] Nowhere else will you find a system like here. (Juana, migrant domestic worker, Brussels, 21 Oct 2014)



Although, Belgium's welfare system has slightly changed over the years, it progressively transformed Juana's identity, from being a woman without rights in Peru, to a citizen in Brussels. This identity shift allowed Juana to acquire ideas, skills, and resources she needed to establish new forms of political participation. As Juana and other interviewees mentioned: "In Peru we were nothing. Here you learn how to be a citizen" (Brussels, 21 Oct 2014). Migrant women's citizenship in Belgium is also used to send civic social remittances to their countries of origin and to reclaim their citizenship status there as well (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016). Nonetheless, as Belgium began to experience the aftermath of the global financial meltdown in 2008, the interviewees' idea of Brussels as an inclusive city was put to the test. In this context Brussels, the global city, became the epicenter from which they protested for the rights they thought they were losing on this side of the Atlantic, as well as for those they never had in their homelands.

In this challenging context, they used transcultural capital to protest against the austerity measures imposed on the Belgian welfare state (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016). Migrants shared the hope that in a nearby future the Belgian welfare state would become an inclusive system for all. Building from their shared collective hope for a new future, along with a nostalgia for their activist days in their countries of origin, migrants took the streets to protest. At the Women's Day demonstration in 2016, traditional Huaylas Andean dancing from their ancestors' region became the social remittance through which migrants delivered their message. On the day of the event, various women from migrant and non-migrant backgrounds joined the Peruvian women to protest at the Brussels Central Station Square. By doing so, they managed to share cultural and civic social remittances (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016). To their own surprise, a former Belgian socialist Prime Minister joined their dance and listened to their message. This Women's Day protest was not an isolated event. Other interviewees like Alejandra, a Colombian woman in her late 50s, have spread other repertoires of conflict or political social remittances (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016), such as public petitions and community actions, either physically in Brussels or through new media and technology. Such social remittances challenge the place of migrants, mostly newcomers, in the city's welfare state while also taking into account the violent conflict in their country of origin:

We get together to raise money to help those in need here and abroad. We get together to raise funds but also to give people a collective consciousness. They need to realize that what's political is economic. So, they are not simply "economic migrants". Violent conflicts [in Colombia or elsewhere] are associated with economic ones and so on. I informally help those coming from Colombia, but also, those coming from Syria, for example. I make no differences. Lately, I have also been helping Latino migrants coming from Spain after the crisis. [...] I lead them to the right kind of lawyers, so they won't lose, for example, the unemployment benefits they brought from Spain. I give them a house to stay in when they need it. I also go out to protest but this is where the real kind of battle is. (Alejandra, migrant domestic worker, Brussels, 21 Oct 2014)

Alejandra's activism goes back to her teenage years as a rural teacher in several communities affected by violent conflicts in Colombia in the 1990s. In Brussels, it



was hard for her to find her place, and she found it once she began being politically engaged, to challenge who she was both in her new city and in the country she left behind. Nonetheless, Alejandra's own place in the Belgian welfare state has been challenged by the austerity measures on the health sector.

Other interviewees such as Laura, have chosen formal political structures such as political parties to set up their platforms for protest. Contrary to Juana and Alejandra, Laura had never engaged in politics before. She came to Brussels as a young *au-pair* at 16 years old. The precarious situation in her own city was what later turned her into a politically engaged Belgian citizen. As Laura wanted to advance in the political scene in Brussels, she encountered that her particular identity of "Andean woman" represented a challenge if she wished to be accepted by those with a migrant background in Brussels, whether Latin Americans or not. As a candidate for commune elections in 2012, she implemented a repertoire of contention but was challenged by her ethnicity:

We wanted the community to win. It wasn't a personal battle, at least not for me. Even Moroccans and Africans also voted for me. It wasn't easy for us to get a place in the party. They usually use foreigners to show the diversity of the city. [...] You know they need you because of your particular profile. I fit the profile: migrant woman, divorcee, etc. I mean, other women would identify themselves with me. I did not win. I'm a replacement and they only call me when someone is sick at the Parliament. I got the letter from the Parliament, though, and to me it was a big achievement. Maybe other Belgians wouldn't see this as important, but I do. The community won. [...] We won a political space. I have seen documents in the party or in the Parliament, where they don't want to make certain rights universal, and we fight for that, for the inclusion of everyone, not just *Latinos*... Now that everyone is losing rights that should be universal, it's important for us to have a voice there. (Laura, social worker and former care worker, Brussels, 21 Oct 2014)

As these repertoires of contention function through various types of social remittances, the interviewees see a possibility to use their transnational social networks and their leftist ideologies to expand their actions abroad:

Researcher: Alejandra, but where do you see your actions having more of a weight?  
Alejandra: I'm an inhabitant of this planet. I fight for a fair and real socialist society. I can keep fighting for social justice from here or there. 'It doesn't matter where one dies, but where one fights' I live by these words, from a famous Colombian duo in the 1980s Ana and Jaime. (Alejandra, former migrant domestic worker, Facebook, 10 May 2017)

Behind the social remittances transmitted by these interviewees, regardless of whether efforts are directed towards changing their inclusion in the political and welfare structures of their sending or receiving societies, there is a guiding transnational social justice script (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2016). This script revolves around a street feminism that is a common form of recognition of the difficulties that are particular to their condition as migrant women or men, with a certain ethnic background, class, and gender in the country of destination. In the following section we will explore how these repertoires of contention, social networks, identities, and ideologies are transposed to challenge the interviewees conditions in the social and political structures they left behind in their countries of origin.

### **13.4 Constructing a Transnational Field of Mobilization from Brussels: Mexican Migrants Engaging to Change the Political System in their Homeland**

This section presents the impact of social remittances on the construction of transnational fields of mobilization in the case of Mexican migrants living in Brussels. The life stories narrated in this part show that Mexican migrants use political opportunities and exploit the economic and social capital available in Brussels to organize their transnational political movements. However, it is essential to recognize that their political behavior is deeply influenced, on the one hand, by their previous anchored experiences, emotions, and political ideologies before arriving in Brussels. On the other hand, the relations and exchanges they sustain with the people back in their hometown determines, to a certain extent, the form and strength of their transnational fields of political mobilization. In short, it is argued that through the international exchange of information, ideas, skills, and resources Mexican migrants have been able to sustain and engage in the politics of their homeland from Brussels.

Ernesto, a 30-year-old man from the south of Mexico, moved to Belgium in 2011. Before settling in Belgium, Ernesto participated in political and social movements back in his town of origin. As a teenager, he travelled to Chiapas to work for 3 months at one of the independent bodies of the Autonomous Communities of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, where he helped in the installation of a telecommunication system.

In Brussels, Ernesto participates in three different types of political and social activities. First, he supports a local NGO, whose aim is to protect mine workers against human rights abuses in the south of Mexico. Despite the distance, he has helped the organization setup their website: “Even if I am here, I am still there” (Ernesto, IT professional, Brussels, 25 Aug 2017). Ernesto does not trust Mexican authorities; that is why he also participates in demonstrations and political events to express his dissatisfaction with the Mexican political system. He organized a small committee with several Mexican friends he met in other political gatherings. This group of Mexicans has been invited several times to conferences organized by European civil groups to raise awareness about the violence and corruption permeating many aspects of the Mexican society. Finally, Ernesto and his friends have organized private dinners to raise funds for the victims of the violence in Mexico.

Overall, Ernesto’s transnational political activism relies on his previous political experiences back in Mexico; his political awareness and desire to engage in Mexican political protests from abroad; and the social and economic capital at his disposal in Brussels. In addition, since Ernesto is in constant communication with his family in Oaxaca, who regularly informs him about the urgent necessities of their hometown, they give him ideas on which specific actors to support from abroad. For instance, they suggested him to help a specific group of women, in the aftermath of an earthquake that affected his hometown in 2017.

Raúl, a Mexican in his late thirties, arrived in Belgium in 2012. Since then, he has worked as a construction worker, a production assistant in music festivals, and

as a salesperson in a chocolate store in Brussels. Raúl has been interested in politics since he was a teenager living in Mexico City, where he participated in demonstrations to defend political prisoners and the victims of the numerous crimes.

Since he came to Brussels, he calls his mother every week to catch up and talk about politics: “My parents have always been interested in Mexican politics. We have always talked about social and political issues back home.” (Raúl, Master’s student, 13 Oct 2017). His political awareness and will to participate in Mexican politics have been translocated to Belgium. His desire to denounce the Mexican government from abroad is fed by the discussions that he has with his relatives, by the Mexican newspapers he reads every day, by the memories he has of his hometown, and by a sense of moral obligation along with the hope to transform his country of origin.

In September 2014, Raúl immediately reacted to denounce the kidnapping of 43 students in Ayotzinapa. This case became very symbolic to denounce the lack of rule of law in Mexico, the inability of the police agents to protect its citizens, and the inefficiency of Mexican authorities to conduct investigations and persecute abuses against civilians (González Villareal 2015). In response to this incident, Raúl called his only Mexican friend in Brussels to protest: “I called my friend to organize something. I wanted to do something, even if it was on my own. I made some banners to denounce what had happened in Mexico. I wanted to go to the Brussels Stock Exchange to protest. My friend gave me the number of two other Mexicans and protested together” (Raúl, Master’s student, 13 Oct 2017).

Raúl’s immediate reaction to protest could be understood by the moral shock he underwent, when he first learned about the missing students of Ayotzinapa. He chose to protest on the stairs of the Brussels Stock Exchange because of their symbolism and tradition, hosting other demonstrations. After the political gathering, Raúl met other Mexicans, with whom he remained in contact and organized demonstrations at the Mexican Embassy and the European Parliament.

Raúl’s decision to engage in homeland politics from abroad was directly influenced by the social remittances he frequently sustains between Brussels and Mexico City. He found out about the case of Ayotzinapa only after reading an online Mexican newspaper. After hearing that people in Mexico City gathered around the Monument to Independence to protest for Ayotzinapa, he decided to demonstrate in a symbolic place in Brussels, as a result. In fact, he adapted a specific strategy of mobilization embedded in Mexico to the Belgian context.

Another example of this is the case of Ana, a Mexican singer and actress who left Mexico 23 years ago. In Mexico, she participated in political protests to support the indigenous communities and denounce several cases of corruption by Mexican officials. Since she moved to Europe, Ana has never forgotten her homeland. She is continuously exchanging information, ideas, and resources with members of the Mexican society to engage in political movements despite being abroad. Her network of personal and professional contacts, both in Mexico and Brussels, has allowed her to organize political demonstrations, lobbying campaigns, and even accommodate a Mexican family fleeing the wave of violence affecting Veracruz.

As a professional singer, Ana believes to be in a privileged position to protest against the Mexican authorities and denounce their failure to protect the civilian population. Ana uses her music and singing to raise awareness in her performances: “I have to use music and singing to denounce. If I remain silent, I become part of them (the Mexican authorities) [...]. The stage is an undeniable space to denounce.” (Ana, singer, 05 May 2017). Ana has managed to align her profession with her political struggle in order to create original and artistic forms of protest. For instance, she makes her own interpretation of traditional Mexican songs, by changing the original lyrics to political messages, aiming to denounce human rights violations and crimes happening in Mexico. Singing traditional songs is important for Ana because it constitutes her social identity and enables her to deliver a political message using symbolic Mexican songs, connecting her to the audience through feelings of nostalgia.

In conclusion, Ana portrays Brussels as a key place to build a transnational field of social mobilization due to its positionality in the European political scene. She believes that the political opportunities available in Brussels are very important for denouncing Mexican injustices in Europe: “You can do more for Mexico from here (Brussels), than from there (Mexico).” (Ana, singer, 05 May 2017) Through her personal networks, profession, cultural repertoire, and political beliefs, Ana has managed to find political and economic channels to set up transnational strategies to engage in Mexican politics from Brussels.

### 13.5 Conclusions

This chapter has presented several examples that illustrate how Latin American migrants living in Brussels engage in political movements in Belgium to challenge their inclusion in the welfare and political systems of their countries of origin and destination. The data shows that these migrants have managed to develop and sustain transnational fields of social and political mobilization to defend their political struggles and ideals from Brussels’ influence and also, become active members of the civil society. Indeed, Latin American migrants have managed to create emancipatory initiatives “of hope and nostalgia” to denounce their disagreement with the current social and welfare systems, in both their places of origin and residence.

First, we recognized the relevance of portraying Brussels as a global city, since it is a place where Latin American migrants have found social, economic, and political capital to develop their own strategies of political engagement. The two case studies presented demonstrate that the specific characteristics of Brussels, its political weight in Europe, and its diversity, create an environment where migrants have managed to find economic and political opportunities to engage in political activities. Secondly, we used the concept of “social remittances” to operationalize the exchanges made and sustained over time between Latin American migrants and people from their hometowns. These flowing ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital (Levitt 1998) have a direct impact on the shape and duration of the political

engagement of Latin American migrants living in Brussels. Through social remittances, migrants remain emotionally attached to their hometowns and they receive first-hand information that triggers their will to participate in political activities. Furthermore, the members of their homeland societies can provide migrants with specific ideas, skills, and resources to protest about a specific injustice or help a particular social project in their home country.

Thirdly, this chapter emphasizes the personal characteristics, ideas, experiences, and subjectivity of migrants that shaped their strategies and repertoires of political engagement. The life stories we present in this chapter stress the role of personal ideologies, cultural capital, beliefs, emotions, and motivations triggering and developing transnational fields of political engagement. As a result, the accumulated life experiences, political values, profession, and personal networks determine the feasibility and longevity of transnational political movements. These transnational political movements are a counteraction against exclusion in, at least, two countries, and might have the potential to challenge the place of migrants in political and welfare systems.

By focusing on the transfer of information, ideas, skills, and resources between Latin-American migrants living in Brussels and their respective homelands, in this chapter, we showed that feelings of hope, nostalgia, and homeland attachment trigger and shape migrants' strategies for political and social mobilization. Indeed, through these transfers and feelings, migrants feel morally obliged and inspired to become active members of the civil society and advocate for better social conditions in two different welfare states.

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