

## **TRANS-MIGRANTS IN MEXICO: A POLICY AND ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDY OF THE 2014 CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE MEXICAN CONTEXT**

*Abstract. This article attempts to investigate and probe the 2014 Central American Refugee crisis and the communications made on the social media Twitter. It does so by first illustrating the factors that motivate people to migrate from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras and explains the context of Mexico's changing policies on migrants. In the second part, a brief analysis of Twitter communications around the (trans)migration crisis and new policy implementation is conducted using big data software.*

**Keywords:** *Twitter, Mexico, transmigrants, Programa Frontera Sur, refugees*

### **Introduction – the Central American Migrant Crisis 2014–2016**

Along with the Middle East migration crisis that impacted Europe in 2015, another migration crisis was occurring in the Western Hemisphere. While migrants from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan were trying to reach Germany via the Balkan route, Central American migrants, particularly from countries of the Northern Triangle (*Triangulo del Norte*) – Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – were attempting to reach the USA via Mexico. The migration of Central American residents to the USA is a phenomenon that has lasted decades. About 54 million Latino Americans live in the USA. Of this number, 33 million are from Mexico, and more than 3 million from the Northern Triangle states.<sup>1</sup> The Pew Hispanic Centre estimates that in 2011 there were 11.1 million illegal immigrants in the USA.<sup>2</sup> What was new about the migration wave that started in the USA in the spring of 2014 was the unprecedented number of unaccompanied minors and mothers with children (family units), mostly from Northern Triangle countries. The migrant crisis attracted the attention of the media with President Barack Obama calling it

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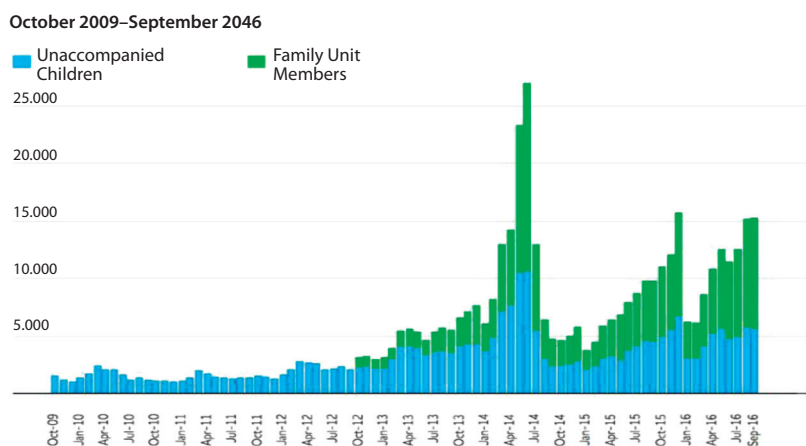
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<sup>1</sup> Accessible at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/18/how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing/>.

<sup>2</sup> Accessible at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/01/29/a-nation-of-immigrants/>.

an “urgent humanitarian situation”. However, the USA has not even tried to solve the problem of children and women migrants in a humane way but used an aggressive media campaign entitled “USA will send you back” to prevent the arrival of new migrants.<sup>3</sup> The campaign underway in Central American countries warned of the dangers migrants would face on the way and the fact they would be turned back if they made it to the US border (Hiskey, Cordova, Orce and Malone, 2016: 1). This form of intimidation did not yield results and migrants continued to arrive in the country (see Graph 1). The USA pressured Mexico to take urgent additional measures to halt migrants seeking to illegally enter the United States by transiting<sup>4</sup> through Mexico. Therefore, in July 2014 Mexico issued a new law on migration *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS). The peak of the migration crisis came in summer 2014 when the biggest number of migrants were apprehended on the Mexican–American border. The number of people who were apprehended dropped, only to rise again in early 2015. Data suggest that in 2016 more than 117,300 migrants from Central America were apprehended by the USA and Mexico, compared to 113,093 in 2014 when the crisis began (Child and Family Migration, 2016: 4–9).

*Graph 1: UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND FAMILY UNIT MEMBERS APPREHENDED ON THE U.S.–MEXICO BORDER*



Source: Child and Family Migration (2016) WOLA. Accessible at <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Migration-Multimedia-Series-Report-Format-Digital.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Accessible at <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/11/politics/immigration-border/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The IOM considers transit to be “A stopover of passage, of varying length, while travelling between two or more countries, either incidental to continuous transportation, or for the purposes of changing planes or joining an ongoing flight or other mode of transport”, *Glossary on Migration (2004)* IOM. Accessible at [http://www.iomvienna.at/sites/default/files/IML\\_1\\_EN.pdf](http://www.iomvienna.at/sites/default/files/IML_1_EN.pdf).

It would be hard for these developments to not impact public opinion in Mexico and we aim to examine a segment of public opinion visible on social networks. Thus, the article examines the content of Twitter messages of Mexican citizens about Mexico's immigration policy PFS and the treatment of migrants traversing the country en route to the USA. The thesis of the paper is that the views about trans-migrants in the Twitter posts of the Mexican citizens largely reflects the official position of the Mexican authorities. Before proceeding to answer this question and in order to contextualise the problem, we provide a review of migration from the Northern Triangle countries and the actions the government of Mexico used in an attempt to resolve the influx of large numbers of migrants who were passing through Mexico on their way to the USA in the 2014–2016 period.

### Literature review on migration from the Northern Triangle countries

Migrations are encouraged by push and pull factors. While the former encourage people to migrate from their native country, the latter attract them to the land of the end destination ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)). The desire to live in the USA can be simply explained in two words – the “American dream”<sup>5</sup>, while there are considerably more push factors. Most commonly, they are divided into natural, economic, cultural and socio-political, and almost all of these factors are found in the Northern Triangle countries. Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are new democracies facing typical transitional, systemic and contextual problems of Latin America (Kos-Stanišić, 2013). Extreme inequality, poverty, and widespread corruption are the common contextual problems of Latin America. Casas-Zamora (2011) claims the Northern Triangle states have poor social indicators, they are fiscally exhausted and lack administrative capacity, and that the state institutions responsible for implementing the law are extremely ineffective.

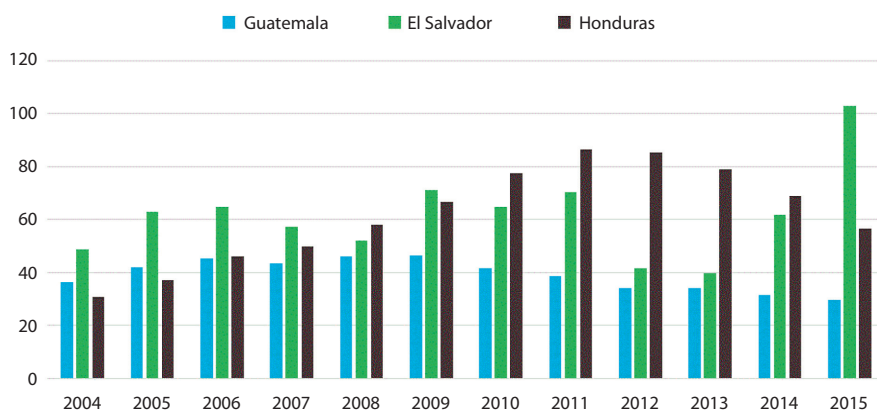
For several years, the Northern Triangle has been the most violent world region outside of active war zones. Most of the violence is carried out by transnational *drug trafficking organisations* (DTOs) – Mexican drug cartels and *mara* gangs. By closing the Caribbean corridor and after the Mexican government's aggressive activities against the DTOs, Central America has become the main transit route for smuggling drugs, primarily cocaine, from South America to the USA. Drug traffickers and the *maras* have been major violators of human rights for a few years within the Northern Triangle. They deprive citizens of the right to life and security, equality before the courts

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<sup>5</sup> “The belief that everyone in the US has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard” (accessible at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/american-dream>).

and undermine the work of governmental investigating and penal institutions (Kos-Stanišić, 2013). They racketeer and blackmail citizens<sup>6</sup>, and kill if they do not receive the money. The forcing of children and young people to become gang members or otherwise be abused or killed is a main reason for the migration since 2013 (Portillo Villeda and Miklos, 2017: 57). At the same time, the Northern Triangle states have seen frequent domestic and sexual violence, and the region is at the top of the world femicide scale.<sup>7</sup> The most elementary human and civil rights, including the right to life, are seriously jeopardised in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala – see Graph 2.

Graph 2: HOMICIDE RATE PER 100,000 INHABITANTS OF THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES (2004–2015)



Source: Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública and Prensa Gráfica (El Salvador), Central America Business Intelligence, CABI and Policía Nacional Civil (Guatemala), Instituto Universitario en Democracia, Paz y Seguridad and El Heraldo (Honduras).

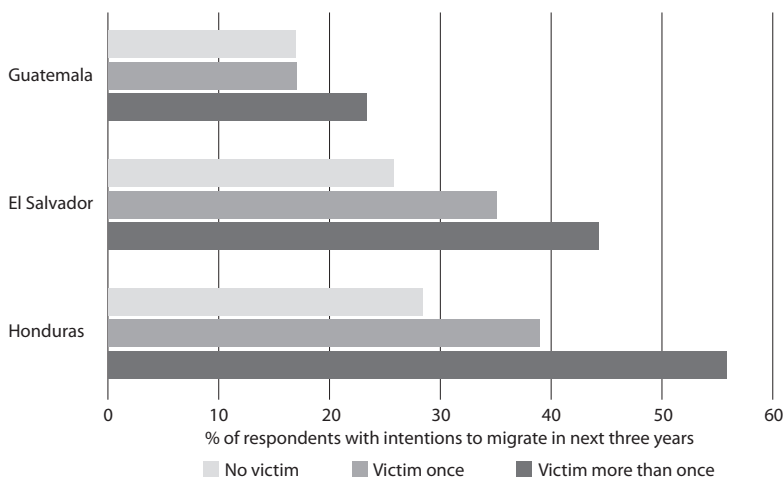
Due to their geographic position, Central American countries are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, including hurricanes, floods, landslides, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. In the last couple of years, this has been compounded by drought, causing food shortages. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) and the IOM, 3.5 million Central American citizens are food-insecure, providing an additional incentive to

<sup>6</sup> It is assumed that in El Salvador USD 390 million is spent on ransom payment every year, USD 200 million in Honduras, and USD 61 million in Guatemala (Child and Family Migration, 2016: 4).

<sup>7</sup> According to the number of murders of females in the 2004–2009 period, El Salvador is in 1st place (12 killed per 100,000 women), Guatemala in 3rd place (9.7 killed per 100,000 women), and Honduras in 7th place. Accessible at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/img/highlights/Femicide-RN14-fig2.pdf>.

migrate for failed small farmers (Chishti and Hipsman, 2016: 3). It should not be forgotten that, by virtue of its proximity to the USA, Central America experienced numerous American interventions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After describing the situation in the Northern Triangle countries, we may conclude that there are numerous threats to human security<sup>8</sup> in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, namely: 1. personal insecurity – physical violence and crime; 2. political insecurity – human rights violations; 3. economic insecurity – chronic poverty and unemployment; 4. environmental uncertainty – frequent natural disasters; 5. community insecurity – threats posed by the *maras*; 6. food insecurity – frequent food shortages; 7. health insecurity – malpractice and inability to access basic health care. Fear is a main cause of migration according to a Vanderbilt University research study that found citizens who were victims of crime had far greater intentions to migrate, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: CRIME VICTIMISATION AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS, 2014



Source: Hiskey, Cordova, Orces, and Malone (2016). Accessible at <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/understanding-central-american-refugee-crisis>.

<sup>8</sup> The Concept of Human Security as defined by the Commission on Human Security is: "...to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment. Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity" (Human Security in Theory and Practice, 2009: 5).

## Context of Mexico's policy on migrants in transit

On their way to their US final destination, migrants from Central America must travel, depending on the route, between 2,000 and 3,500 kilometres across Mexico, a country that shares a 3,200-kilometre border with the USA. This fact has influenced the course of Mexico's historical and political development, painted exquisitely by the Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz as "Poor Mexico! So far from God, and so close to the United States". Mexico's problems with Central American migrants began in 1981 when, due to conflict in the region, 80,000 Guatemalan citizens sought political asylum in Mexico. Most immigrants settled in Chiapas, which significantly upset the situation in the south of the country. Some of the immigrants stayed in Mexico and some was returned to their country of origin. During the Central American conflict, more than 1 million people in the region emigrated to the USA. After settling in the USA, they encouraged their family members to join them, and the USA asked Mexico to more effectively control its southern border. After American criticism, the number of deportations grew significantly in the 1988–1990 period. In the 1990s, the USA increasingly strengthened its southern boundaries, climaxing after 11 September 2001 when it securitised its relations with Latin America (Domínguez, 2010: 13–14). This particularly related to Mexico, to which the USA had paid special attention in the "Global War on Terror", fearing that terrorists might enter the USA from Mexico for a new terrorist attack. Mexico demonstrated its solidarity with the USA during the rule of President Vicente Fox (2000–2006), the Southern Plan (*Plan Sur*) and by intensifying the deportation of migrants, including non-terrorists. Data from the Mexican Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) show in 2000 the number of illegal migrants from Central America, mostly the Northern Triangle states, reached about 236,000, in 2005 there were 433,000 and about 140,000 in 2010. More than half the migrants were deported from Mexico.

Before 2001, migrants were deported to Guatemala where they were generally waiting for the next opportunity to cross the border. After 2001, the financing of the deportations was taken over by the USA, which bused migrants back to their native countries. The reason was significant savings because deportation from the USA cost USD 1,700 per person but just USD 22 from Mexico (Lopez, 2015: 63). Mexico clarified its agreement with the USA that migration is a threat to national security in 2005 when the National Institute of Migration (INM) was included in the composition of the National Security Council (Isacson, Meyer and Morales, 2014: 20). President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) continued his predecessor's policy and proclaimed the *Programa Frontera Sur Segura*. It was emphasised that the programme's goals were to protect the human rights of migrants, to modernise the border

crossings and more accurately identify persons crossing the border, making the programme a predecessor to the PFS. The security of the state borders is linked to national security, and Mexico has intensified the presence of its forces in the south and militarised them. Over time, there was a change in Mexicans' attitude towards migrants:

*Rather than view migrants as fellow citizens in need of protection, asylum, or refugee services, there has grown a tendency to perceive them as potential enemies, lawbreakers, and as less worthy of citizenship benefits and protections than Mexican nationals.* (Donnelly, 2014: 11, according to Isacson et al., 2014: 20)

Residents of the Northern Triangle do not need a visa or passport to cross the border between Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, but do need one to enter Mexico. Therefore, crossing the border away from official border crossings and non-possession of a visa is considered a violation and irregular migration. Although migrants transiting through Mexico have always been subject to various types of abuse, since 2010, when more than 250 migrants were killed in Tamaulipas by the Zeta cartel, the international community, particularly the Central American countries, has requested more effective migration protection from the Mexican government. Namely, around 20,000 migrants are assumed to be kidnapped every year, and ransom sought for them, while the non-payment of ransom is punished by death (Lopez, 2015: 69–73). Thus, Mexico has found itself in a situation that its neighbours from the south were seeking protection for their citizens in transit, and the neighbours from the north were seeking to prevent their transit. This not only relates to migrants but also to drugs intended for the US market. On coming to power, Mexican President Calderón faced the problem of drug cartels disrupting the functioning of the state in part of its territory. He declared war and sent 50,000 soldiers out onto the streets, leading to the militarisation of public security. The fight against drug cartels and the reliance on the army continued with President Enrique Peña Nieto (from 2012 till present). As the actions of the government disrupt the balance of power between the cartels, there is growing violence and a struggle for power and territory among them. Criminal organisations not only deal with drug trafficking but smuggling, trafficking in human beings, racketeering and, lately, theft of oil from the pipeline. The fact the security situation in Mexico is highly complicated is indicated by data showing that 109,000 citizens were killed and 30,000 went missing from 2006 to 2016 (Ribando, Selke and Finkea, 2017).

David Haines (2013: 2–4) claims that states shape their policy, i.e. action plan, in accordance with their broader beliefs, social conditions and ethical determinants. A 'good' policy should be based on the political and cultural

context of the state, and synchronised with the minimum international standards, unlike a 'bad' migration policy. During the 20th century,<sup>9</sup> and especially in the period of trans-migrant engagement since 2001, Mexico has run a restrictive migration policy. The peak came on 7 July 2014 when President Peña Nieto proclaimed a new strategy for the Mexican Southern border – *Programa Frontera Sur*. The denomination “southern border” includes the Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco states, which share nearly 750 miles (1,138 km) of the porous border with Guatemala and Belize. According to Wilson and Valenzuela (2014: 1–2), the main declared PFS goals were to protect migrants in Mexico and manage border crossings in a way to ensure the region's security and prosperity. The key elements of the programme were regular and ordered migration, infrastructure improvements, protection of migrants, regional shared responsibility and interagency coordination. Arriola Vega (2016: 2–3) states the *Programa Frontera Sur* foresaw, among other things, the creation of three security belts – first, at the border crossings, second, in the south of the country and the third across the Isthmus (Istmo de Tehuantepec) – along with the implementation of 187 economic projects in the southern border states.

## Implementation of PFS and the consequences

Migrant transit through Mexico has never been easy or secure but, by adopting the *Programa Frontera Sur* strategy, it has become considerably more difficult and more uncertain, and been frequently criticised by civil society organisations dealing with human rights and migrants, as well as by international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Isacson, Meyer and Morales (2014) explain the border area between Mexico and Guatemala is porous because very few people live there and thus there are only 8–10 official and about 40 unofficial border crossings along the 800 km boundary. The border passes through the Suchiate and Usumacinta rivers, across jungle terrain, and is easily crossed aside from the border crossings. For these reasons, Mexico was forced to move its border in-state ('vertical border'). The vertical border control included numerous security agencies and the army, and most migrants in transit were arrested in the interior of the state. Apprehension is followed by deportation, officially called “rescues”, and care for the security of migrants. However, migrants

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<sup>9</sup> Lopez (2015) identifies five periods of the immigrant history of Mexico: 1. low-intensity immigration (1821–1876); 2. the sponsored arrival of white European immigrants (1876–1910); 3. closure of the borders (1910–1973) except in the case of receiving several thousand (25,000) well-educated and reputable Spanish Republicans from 1937 to 1938; 4. *laissez-faire* policy and beginning of engagement (1973–2000); 5. trans-migrant engagement (after 2000).



who have paid (about USD 8,000) smugglers to pass through Mexico to the US border have far greater chances of their transit proceeding “unhindered” (ibid.: 10–11, 18, 26, 32).

In the field, the PFS led to the activation of more agents from the National Institute for Migration (INM) which, although without arms, joined the federal, state and municipal police in migration enforcement. The number of raids and checks increased, and civilian agents hunted migrants, traveling by the most common transit vehicle, the “La Bestia” train that connects Mexico south to north (Child and family migration, 2016: 14). Since transit routes were under scrutiny, migrants were forced to scatter and use more hidden and dangerous paths. The traditional transit route from the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca to Tijuana and California was replaced by a new route through Tabasco Veracruz and Nuevo Leon to Tamaulipas and Texas. By changing the way and direction of their movement, migrants have become less visible and more vulnerable. In addition to possibly being arrested and deported by the Mexican authorities, they have become exposed to harm, frequent criminal acts and human rights violations, such as kidnapping and extracting ransom, sexual abuse or sexual harassment, looting and murder. At the same time, they have become an additional income source not only for members of the criminal underground, but also for the authorities.<sup>10</sup>

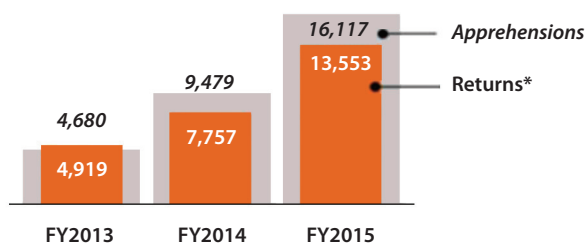
The UNHCR has warned that half of the children and a significant number of women should receive international protection and be considered as refugees. The definition of a refugee varies from country to country. Mexico has legally recognised the right of asylum since 2011 in the case of persecution or the fear of persecution based on race, gender, religion, nationality and belonging to a particular social or political group as well as in the case of “generalized violence; foreign aggression; internal conflicts; massive violation of human rights; and other circumstances leading to a serious disturbance of public order”. Despite the broad definition of refugees, the number of applications for asylum is low. Migrants are unfamiliar with their rights, and even after arrest by migration agents they rarely know there is a possibility of seeking asylum. However, the number of requests is rising year by year, but COMAR (*Comision Mexicana de Ayuda de Refugiados*) does not have enough staff or accommodation capacity for asylum-seekers so the procedure lasts a very long time. Castillo (2016: 3–4) states that in 2013 Mexico received 1,296 asylum applications and approved 280; in 2014, out of 2,137 requests, 456 were approved and, in 2015, 949 requests were approved out of 3,424. Visa applications have risen by 169% in 3 years, and

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Mexican Commission for the Protection of Human Rights and the complaints of migrants, the abuse by immigration officials increased by 53% in just one year (Child and family migration, 2016: 15), and the number of corrupt policemen and migration agents is growing.

COMAR has not been given increased funding (USD 2 million) as opposed to INM which, among other things, has a USD 86 million budget available for the arrest and deportation of migrants. In the first nine months of 2016, asylum was requested by 5,944 migrants in Mexico, with 1,746 approved and 326 migrants receiving protection (Child and Family Migration, 2016: 15). Castillo (2016) also warns of the inconsistency of Mexican politics because it demands the USA show a more humane relationship towards migrants (especially from Mexico), while not extending the same courtesy towards migrants from Central America.

Figure 2: MEXICO: APPREHENSION AND RETURNS OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE



\*Returns might include individuals apprehended before that fiscal year.

Source: SEGOB figures converted into fiscal years for comparison with U.S. data: graphic prepared by CRS.

Source: Ribando Seelke and Clare (2016): CRS Mexico's Recent Immigration Enforcement Efforts, accessible at [www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov).

Nonetheless, migrants who were victims of crime as they passed through Mexico have been able to apply for humanitarian visas. In 2014, 483 were approved while in 2015 1,150 humanitarian visas were issued to migrants from the North Triangle countries (Ribando Seelke, 2016: 2).

Castillo (2016: 2) concludes that after 2 years of implementing the *Programa Frontera Sur* it is evident Mexico has given priority to the apprehension and deportation of migrants, but not their protection. According to SEGOB data, after the *Programa Frontera Sur* was adopted, the number of deportations has increased considerably. In 2013, Mexico deported 80,079 migrants, mostly from Central America. Of the above-mentioned figure, 8,350 were minors. In 2014, the number of deportees was 107,814, of whom 18,169 were minors (Boggs, 2015).

The 2014–2015 migrant crisis held significant consequences for the relationship between Mexico and the USA, but also Mexico and the states of the Northern Triangle. In the eyes of the USA and the creators of US foreign

policy, Mexico has become a regional partner that prevents the arrival of illegal migrants and potential terrorists in the USA. On the other hand, Central American public opinion has reproached Mexico for its ambiguity and politics as an extended arm of the USA, implementing a hostile policy towards its neighbours. The governments of Central America have, however, remained diplomatic (Donnelly, 2014: 11–12).

### Migration movements and policy discourses on Twitter

International migration management is a key challenge for states in a globalised international security environment, and the first step sovereign states must take is to adopt an adequate migration policy. A country uses migration policy to decide who can enter it and who can become its citizen. “One of the most migration-related developments in the Age of Migration has been the linking of migration to security, a process of social construction called *securitization*” (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2014: 198). Government employees, politicians, media, migrants and their allies, as well as the public are all involved in securitisation and desecuritisation. Very often a key role is played by the media since the way it reports on migrants (positively or negatively) leads or does not lead to securitisation (ibid.: 198).

Migration from poor countries is often fuelled by a lack of human security there. The issue of migrants’ insecurity in transit or destination countries is not taken into account. It is often caused by the feeling held by citizens of a transit or destination country that they are threatened by migrants culturally (especially linguistically and religiously), socio-economically and politically, by potentially disloyal and subversive migrants (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2014: 199–200). “Real or imagined links to terrorism, organized crime and health threats are at the core of the perception of irregular migration as a security threat” (Wohlfeld, 2014: 68). The securitisation of irregular migration increases citizens’ perception that migration is a genuine security threat. *How the World Views Migration* (2015) is the IMO’s report on the attitudes of citizens from 140 countries on immigration.<sup>11</sup> Citizens’ attitudes and the immigration policy of their home countries generally coincide. Where citizens’ attitudes to immigration are negative, the government implements a policy of reducing the number of migrants, and vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ford (2011) believes that public opinion polls on immigrant attitudes suffer from serious methodological deficiencies because they do not differ in colour, ethnic origin, or education. Thus, in the case of British attitudes, there is a hierarchy of preference, meaning some migrants are “acceptable” to the British (whites, like British or Western) and some are “unacceptable” (“coloured” and “culturally different”).

<sup>12</sup> The Gallup World Poll asked two questions of the surveyed citizens. First, in their opinion, should the number of immigrants in their country be kept the same, increased or reduced? Second, do they think that immigrants mostly take jobs that citizens of their state want or do not want?

This is exactly the case in Mexico in which the mentioned research found that 54% of citizens want to reduce the number of immigrants, while 20% want to keep them, and 19% wish to increase the number of immigrants. Public opinion and media discourse influence those creating migration policy, but it is difficult to determine “whether people are generally modelling their attitudes towards migration levels after existing national immigration policies or whether such policies reflect rather the public” (ibid.: 37). Although this paper focuses on migrants in transit rather than immigrants, the fact remains that a certain number remains in Mexico and is trying to start a new life, especially after Donald Trump rose to power in the USA.

Discourses on social media can often help shape policies. Social media have become integral in everyday life, also encapsulating personal communications around politics as well – the personal and political are quite intertwined (Highfield, 2016: 3). Real-life events such as migration crises are commented on extensively online, whether by anonymous individuals, celebrities, politicians or prominent activists. All those online interactions are observed by the publics that constitute themselves online: “networked publics”, “networked public sphere” and “network society” are useful, newer concepts for use when one wishes to examine discourses on social media (Benkler, 2006; boyd, 2011; Castells, 2007, all in Highfield, 2016: 65). Such interactions can be observed on Twitter as its sentiment can mirror the sentiment that exists in the offline world (Bae and Lee, 2012, cited in Siapera, Hunt and Lynn, 2015: 1305). In addition, it must be taken into account that offline and online experiences impact each other (Highfield, 2016: 7). The primary goal of our own Twitter research was to discover *what* its users communicate when it comes to Mexico’s immigration policy (*Programa Frontera Sur*) and the way migrants and refugees traversing the country en route to the USA are processed.

Twitter, a microblogging site launched in 2006, is designed for users to post short 140-character updates to a network of others (Maverick and boyd, 2010: 116). It is estimated that 500 million tweets are published daily around the world (Schatten, Ševa and Okreša Đurić, 2015: 31). The majority of Twitter accounts are public and those tweets can be accessed by anyone. On the other hand, users’ tweets are private if they wish to protect their accounts or share their tweets only with selected followers (Maverick and boyd, 2010: 117). The practice of “retweeting” allows a single tweet to be disseminated by another user to their followers, thus spreading the reach of the original tweet. Twitter functions as both a news medium and a system of social awareness (Kwak et al. 2010; Hermida 2010, cited in Siapera, Hunt and Lynn, 2015: 1297).

When it comes to investigating Twitter academically, big data analysis is useful as tweets are abundant and multiply on a daily basis. Big data are

born-digital data, huge in volume, and expanding rapidly (Kitchin, 2014: 1–2). Rob Kitchin called it a “disruptive innovation” by providing access to massive quantities of data to social scientists (Kitchin, 2014: 10). Ralph Schroder (2014: 6) identified big data as an important novelty, one that stretches the scale and scope of knowledge on a topic and provides new avenues for social scientists to study human behaviour.

In their *Critical questions for Big Data*, danah boyd and Kate Crawford (2012) chose to spell the term in capital letters to point out the importance of big data as a phenomenon. The authors identify six important questions that can be useful to frame the debate around born-digital data, and to those who study it. Some challenges that surface while dealing with large data quantities include the ‘data cleaning’ process during which researchers decide which variables to include and which to leave out (Boyd and Crawford, 2012: 667). The decision to include one political hashtag while mining Twitter and to ignore another is subjective. Large data sets can be flawed as contents from the Internet are prone to outages and losses. In the case of Twitter, users can delete their posts and accounts or the same can be done by Twitter themselves if it determines the content is violating its policies (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 668). Further, researchers can be prone to see patterns in big data sets where there may not be any. This case of ‘*apophenia*’ is another danger of investigating massive data sets (ibid.).

Quite important is the notion that Twitter does not represent all people nor is representative of the global population. People tweet in different languages (or use different platforms), some have multiple user accounts, some have none but simply tune in to ‘listen’ (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 669). Some users are active every day while others choose to stay silent and post occasionally. Another liability is the existence of ‘bots’, namely, automated accounts that produce content. Software robots – ‘bots’, when active in aggregating content on political Twitter, may contaminate the platform’s information and news dissemination (Siapera, Hunt and Lynn, 2015: 1305). Twitter also restricts access to data and wealthier researchers can gain greater access, not to mention those with immediate access. Boyd and Crawford are very sceptical of this “digital divide” and of the notion that social scientists are often inept because they do not possess a computational background in order to analyse big data (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 669–674).

Eugenia Siapera and colleagues researched the 2014 Operation Protective Edge, an Israeli offensive that erupted ferociously in the Gaza Strip and on Twitter as well, under the #GazaUnderAttack hashtag. Siapera, Hunt and Lynn (2015) harvested Twitter and investigated almost 3 million original tweets and conducted word, hashtag and sentiment analysis. Their work is important as they discovered global, polylingual participation. Even though they found many-to-many communication, it had a pyramid

structure with “a clear hierarchy in terms volume, popularity and diffusion of contents” (Siapera, Hunt and Lynn, 2015: 1314–1315). Contrary to their work, Marco Bastos and Dan Mercea (2016) focused their research efforts on individual civic participation on political Twitter. They were interested in users who differ from elites and ordinary users – politically charged users they dubbed “serial activists”; non-influential Twitter users with a negligible number of followers but crucial for “message cascade associated with protest hashtags” (Bastos and Mercea, 2016: 2363). The research on “serial activists” has yielded evidence that not only activists, celebrities and politicians (as one would traditionally expect them to be – the opinion-making elite) are relevant actors on political Twitter and that there is more to be said about more humble users of the social media (Bastos and Mercea, 2016: 2374). A similar claim is made by Tim Highfield (2016: 78–79) in his book *Social Media and Everyday Politics* where he argues that social media users can exert influence on a certain topic, whether on an individual or group level. Anja Stević and Viktorija Car (2017) conducted research on the European migration crisis of 2015 and Twitter communications and found that Twitter content, especially iconic imagery, influenced the user perception of refugees and migrants.

During the Central American refugee crisis, a distinct peak occurred in the summer of 2014. A sudden surge in numbers of family units and unaccompanied children was documented (Graph 1). We chose to investigate that period of communications on Twitter. A preliminary study was conducted using the Advanced search option Twitter offers in order to determine the conversations that occurred in the summer of 2014. The following political hashtags were investigated: #migrantes, #transmigrantes, #ProgramaFronteraSur, #USAwillsendyouback. We decided to investigate these hashtags as Highfield (2016: 16) notes that the use of hashtags (markers) demonstrates the “value of debate” on a certain topic in a digital environment. Hashtags are an integral part in online communicating in crises since they “centralize important information” (Highfield, 2016: 91). The following keywords and phrases were utilised: *migrantes*, *politica*, *Triangulo del Norte*, *transmigrantes*, *La Bestia*, *politica de inmigracion*. We decided to harvest data utilising the above-mentioned hashtags and keywords while being fully aware that social media discussions do not follow one, unique narrative, but multiple narratives that can even counter each other (Highfield, 2016: 43, 80).

## Data gathering and interpretation

In order to analyse the online communications on Twitter, a big data approach was utilised. This was done with use of the Social Media Tracking and Analysis System (SMTAS)<sup>13</sup> software designed by computer scientists and researchers at the Social Science Research Centre of Mississippi State University. The team at the Innovative Data Laboratory (IDL) was interested in building a tool for social media research and successfully tested it with the 2012 Superstorm Sandy (IDL, 2013). The SMTAS software is primarily focused on Twitter and its researchers have access to 500 million tweets per day, as well as historical data in terms of previously published tweets (IDL, 2013). Within SMTAS, researchers can create “studies” and conduct geo-mapping, trend, sentiment and Klout score analysis, as well as content analysis. The entire software is situated on cloud servers and the geo-mapping is made possible by Google Maps (IDL, 2013).

The data loaded into SMTAS for this study consisted of 7,708 individual tweets posted by 5,365 users from 14 June 2014 to 15 July 2014. We selected those dates and utilised the keywords and hashtags noted above due to the relevance of time (influx of trans-migrants and implementation of the new policy). Because of the word limitation of this article, this research focuses mainly on quantitative aspects of the study, simultaneously understanding the need for qualitative analysis of communicated content. The most intense days of Twitter communications were 15 June and 8, 12 and 13 July, which corresponds with implementation of the new policy. The top keywords for the timeframe are illustrated in Figure 3.

The most active users in terms of their Klout score were ordinary people with limited reach. Whereas for highly politicised topics such as this one the main communicators are expected to be influencers like the media, politicians and activists, this sample revealed the opposite. SMTAS lists the top-5 user accounts and in this study four accounts are active, whereas the fifth @KeyBree\_ is no longer active. The first four users are still active on Twitter and communicate in Spanish. The user @pedroultereras tweeted the most on the topic. His brief Twitter biography describes him as a “world citizen” and a “migrant”. However, Mr Ultereras is an acclaimed filmmaker and thus does not have the anonymity of the average Twitter user. In other words, he is a potential influencer. In his posts, he includes photographs and statements of migrants, tweeting fairly without emotional charge. The same finding is made among the most active users – users who tweet the most. Again, no influencer was present in the top five accounts, if we

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fulfil their purpose? These are all starting points that remain to be addressed in a qualitative manner. While big data gave us a good description of this communication situation, it has not revealed everything. A deeper, contextual analysis is required in order to further understand the 2014 Central American Refugee Crisis and its Twitter-related content.

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