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Enough to get back, or still better  
overseas? Recession, migration policies  
and the prospects for return in Ecuador

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## Abstract

The paper explores the potential impact of the current worldwide recession on labour migration flows, by analyzing the case of Ecuador – a context of accelerated emigration to Europe (and to the US) since the late nineties. This case study can be helpful for assessing the significance of several concomitant factors in shaping migration systems: public policies in the sending and receiving countries, the labour market demand (and its deterioration), the scope for the self-maintenance of migrants' own social networks. After a review of the key impingements of the global crisis on this migration flow, we analyze the novel developments of Ecuadorian emigrant policies. The latter are somewhat symbolized by a pervasive emphasis on migrant return, which echoes – with obvious differences and less obvious similarities – emerging political concerns in the main countries of destination. We finally contend that a massive return is an implausible (and at least in the short run, undesired) scenario, also in the light of the increasing family stabilization of migrants abroad, and of the still dubious prospects for economic and social development in Ecuador. We also argue for the need to understand, even under circumstances of worldwide recession, the distinct time-scale and the inherent self-feeding potential of a long distance migration system, such as the one linking Ecuador and Europe.

**Keywords:** Ecuador – Migration policies – Remittances – Return – Recession.

*We need each and every one of you [emigrants] to build our free, noble and sovereign Motherland.<sup>1</sup>*

*There are some 50,000 unemployed Ecuadorians in Spain, and of course – if they all return, we're unable to take care of them... we're also trying to provide them with as much legal support as possible, in order to protect their rights, and the Casa Ecuatoriana is a place where they gather and keep connected with their homeland and culture. But the problem, to be sure, is very serious – we can't cope with unemployment in Spain.<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

The paper explores the ways in which the world recession is shaping a long distance, relatively novel migration flow, such as the one between Ecuador and Europe. In a scenario of global economic instability, and of escalating unemployment, this case study provides helpful insights on two interrelated issues: (i) the scope for migration policies – national and supranational ones, in the source and in the receiving context – aiming to govern (and even to reverse) a massive, and mostly self-developed, migration flow; (ii) the relevance of migration networks' resilience – i.e., the self-perpetuating potential of a migration chain, despite the relative deterioration in immigrants' life conditions overseas.

Ecuador, though a minor political actor in the LAC area, is a promising case for assessing the impact of the economic crisis on migration. In a sense, it has experienced a semi-permanent condition of economic and political crisis for the last three decades at least (Acosta, 2009). On the one hand the country, long involved in a US-addressed migration system, has produced a massive emigration flow since the nineties, as a result of its own financial institutions' collapse (World Bank, 2004). New Ecuadorian emigrants have found overseas (mainly in Western Europe) a window of opportunity – in terms of low-skilled labour demand and of relatively benign immigration policies – that has given way by now to a much less favourable scenario. On the other hand, the country itself – a dollarized economy, heavily reliant on oil incomes and on migrant remittances, with a high foreign debt – is especially vulnerable to the repercussions of a

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<sup>1</sup> R. Correa, in an appeal to Ecuadorian expatriates (available at [www.migranteecuadoriano.gov.ec](http://www.migranteecuadoriano.gov.ec)).

<sup>2</sup> R. Correa, interview to the Spanish daily El País, 28/04/09.

global crisis, whatever the policies (and the rhetoric) developed in domestic politics (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2009).

Such repercussions, however, call for a multifaceted analysis. In the short term, to be sure, remittances have been significantly dropping, as Ecuadorian migrants are overexposed (compared with native workers) to worsening conditions in the labour market, in housing, in consumptions, possibly in the general climate underlying their daily interactions overseas. Still, is this enough to spur a widespread return migration phenomenon – and indeed, to make the migration option less attractive (let alone feasible), in the public discourse in Ecuador?

The impact of public policies, in this respect, also needs further elaboration. Can a significant connection exist between the Ecuadorian *Plan Bienvenid@s a casa*, facilitating a voluntary return of those expatriates who wish to, and European programmes such as the Spanish *Plan de Ayuda al retorno voluntario*, incentivizing a semi-permanent return of unemployed immigrant workers? Or, are their respective policy agendas too diverging, for any actual synergy to result in practice? Overall, what is the aggregate effect of migrants' autonomous agency: under what circumstances and expectations may they opt to remain there, to move elsewhere, or even to return?

Drawing from a fieldwork and policy analysis developed in Ecuador and in Italy,<sup>3</sup> the paper will take stock of the implications of the economic crisis, as far as the future prospects of Ecuadorian migration are concerned. We will particularly focus on the evolution of migration and migrant policies, both in the areas of origin and of destination. To be sure, state policies interact with two more crucial factors at least (which we will analyze to a lesser extent): the social and economic consequences of the global crisis (both “here” and “there”), and the aggregate effects of migrants' own strategies of reaction to their increased vulnerability.

At the beginning of the paper, after a brief literature review on the recession-migration nexus, we specially approach the Ecuadorian case. Migration from the country is analyzed in its recent evolution, and the relevance of the economic and political position of Ecuador, within the LAC scenario, is critically regarded. The next section is concerned with the interaction between worsening economic prospects for Ecuadorian migrants, in receiving countries such as Spain and (to a lesser extent) Italy, and the aggregate effects of migrants' potential for adaptation. The last section analyzes the prospects for return migration to Ecuador, taking into account both the role of the country of origin and of the receiving ones. Some critical remarks, drawing on the Ecuadorian case (but spanning somewhat beyond it), will be provided at last.

## **I. Approaching the impact of the 2008-09 recession on labour migration flows**

While arguably serious, the impact on migration flows of the crisis started with the “credit crunch” in late 2007 – and then propagated to the financial systems and the real economy,

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<sup>3</sup> The paper builds on our own empirical studies on Ecuadorian migration to Europe, concerning the structural development of this novel migration flow (Lagomarsino, 2006), as well as some related sociological issues: transnational family life (Boccagni, 2009a; Ambrosini, Lagomarsino, Abbatecola, 2009), the inclusion of immigrant second generations (Cannarella, Lagomarsino, Queirolo Palmas 2007) and political transnationalism (Boccagni, 2009c). We are grateful to several colleagues who provided us with fresh information and insights – namely Luis Tupac Yupanqui, Alberto Acosta, Patricia Gutierrez, Gioconda Herrera and Jacques Ramírez. We are also very grateful to all the migrants (and their family members left behind) who hosted us during fieldwork and were available to share with us significant fragments of their life experiences.

resulting in a worldwide economic contraction – is overall still uncertain. Evidence on the matter is, so far, “scarce and anecdotal” (Duvell, 2009). Exploring a social phenomenon *in fieri*, with no medium-term dataset available, is a challenging option – provided one expects to go further than a descriptive, press-style account. The necessity to provide a fresh and updated assessment may lead to overemphasize short-term, economic cycle-related effects, neglecting the more complex and articulated temporal scale of a long-distance migration flow. Even so, making sense of the migration-crisis nexus in empirical terms is helpful for two reasons at least. To begin with, the issue is indeed perceived as a significant one by the publics and the decision makers, both in sending and receiving countries. It has also, of course, very real consequences at several levels – from the sending states’ balance of payments, significantly reliant on remittances, to the very scope for livelihood and daily reproduction of migrants workers *and* of their “significant others” left behind.

In the second place, exploring the recession-migration nexus on a national scale sheds light on a topic of remarkable interest for migration studies: the interaction between state-led migration policies, and the grassroots development and reproduction of migration flows. Migrants’ own agency is in fact, together with other factors (*viz.* the labour market needs and a regime of embedded liberal rights), a key reasons for the often sub-optimal results, or even the failures of the stated objectives of migration policies (Castles, 2004). A “gap” may in fact be discovered, even under recession circumstances, “between popular demands for tighter immigration control and limited (and/or ineffective) state responses” (Cornelius and Rosenblum, 2005: 106)

As one tentatively explores the long-term effects of the current recession, helpful hints can be provided by an analysis of the past decades’ main downturns, as to their effects on migration patterns. A primary reference is typically made to the 1973 oil crisis (Migration DRC, 2009; Castles and Vezzoli, 2009; Martin, 2009). This is commonly associated to a major turning point in migration policies, *i.e.* the end of the State-led guest-worker migration programmes, previously established in several Central and Northern European countries. Still, rather than inverting migration flows, the crisis highlighted the structural dependence of receiving countries on foreign labour. Despite the remarkable deterioration of immigrant employment in key sectors such as manufacturing and construction, no large scale return migration took place in the mid-seventies – regardless of the stated expectations of governments in host societies. As a large number of temporary workers *de facto* turned into permanent settlers, the earlier “buffer theory” approach to migration proved unable to account for the ethnicization of the labour market (even under adverse circumstances), as well as for the family settlement of earlier migrants. While a significant deceleration in new inflows did occur, this resulted more in a differentiation in their internal composition, than in an actual interruption. As Dobson et al. (2009: 9) sum it up,

First, in promulgating their temporary labour immigration programmes, governments failed to appreciate the structure of employment, particularly that some occupations came to be seen as “migrant jobs” and were shunned by the indigenous population. These were not always the jobs lost during the downturn. Second, there was a failure to understand the self-feeding process of migration which inevitably led to family settlement. Third, migrants would not necessarily be better off if they returned to their own countries. Finally, the increasing trend toward social justice for migrants led to a growing concern with integration and the incorporation of migrants into the population as a whole.

The 1997-99 financial crisis that broke out in South Eastern Asia, instead, is commonly regarded as less dramatic in its consequences on migration flows. Although worsening employment conditions did apply to migrants in many respects, no deportations on a large scale took place,

while there was no decrease in the dependence on immigrant labour for key agricultural activities, in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia. In two to three years since the inception of the crisis, the number of migrants was unchanged or even increased, in most of the countries of the area (Migration DRC, 2009; Martin, 2009).

Compared with the earlier crises, the 2008-09 recession stands out for its really worldwide reach, as well as for its concurrence with a period of intensified migration (and of unprecedented remittance flows) on a global scale (Rogers, 2009). Within Europe, as a result, relevant return migration flows – or indeed, an increase in circulatory migration patterns – could occur between the Western countries and the post-enlargement member states – e.g. Poland and, to a lesser extent, Romania. Quantitative evidence in the respect, however, is still very limited. This is even more the case when it comes to extra-EU migration flows, such as the one to be dealt with in this paper.

## **2. From one crisis to the next? The development of Ecuadorian migration since the 90s**

Ecuador, in itself, is only a minor actor in the geopolitical scenario of the Andean region or, for that matter, of Latin America overall. Still, it provides an outstanding vantage point for exploring the potential impingements of recession on migration flows, due to a peculiar combination of three factors:

- i.) a recent history of massive emigration to Spain, driven also by the economic boom of that country in the early 2000s, against its current economic downturn;
- ii.) a chronic economic and political instability, well symbolized by the adoption of a dollarization regime (since 2000) which arguably makes Ecuador more vulnerable to the recession than the rest of the region – also as a result of its scarcely diversified export, along with the dependence on oil revenues, and a very high foreign debt;
- iii.) a recent pro-active turn in emigrant-addressed policies, most apparent since President Correa's elections in late 2006. This has resulted, among other (mostly symbolic) provisions, in an unprecedented emphasis on emigrants' opportunities for (or even rights to) return. While contentious both in the underlying political agenda and in its impact, this State-led claim has ironically gained greater credibility, as it happened to be temporally overlapping with the more severe phase of the US recession, as of now.

During the nineties Ecuador was struck by one of the most accelerated economic crises of the XX century, with severe impingements on a political and social terrain (World Bank, 2004). In a few years only, the country underwent an accelerated impoverishment process, as the relative poverty rates rose up from 34% to 71%, involving some 9 million citizens. Simultaneously, extreme poverty grew from 12% to 31% (Acosta, 2005; Cartillas sobre Migración, 2002; 2004).

After a prolonged stagnation period, in 1999 the worst ever GDP decrease took place in the country – by 6.3%, if calculated in constant *suces* (the old Ecuadorian currency, replaced by the US dollar in early 2000); even more severely, by 28%, if calculated in US dollars. The estimated per capita GDP declined by 30% in the same year, reaching an average value of little more than 1,400 USD – just some 43% of the Latin American average. Especially striking was the escalation in wealth concentration rates. While the lowest quintile of the population had 4.6% of national incomes in 1990, it did not even reach 2.5% ten years later, while the relative share of the top quintile had increased from 52% to 61% (Acosta, 2005).

Although Ecuador, as a country, has gone through manifold critical phases in its past history, the late nineties have proved an extraordinarily difficult period. The roots of this financial and economic crisis are, in fact, diversified. No univocal and unidimensional explanation can suffice, as, altogether, “the 1997-2000 systemic crisis can be understood as a consequence of three simultaneous crises: an economic, a political-institutional and a social one” (Goycochea and Ramírez, 2002).

An analysis of the structural factors that accounted for this accelerated crisis is obviously out of this paper (cf., among others, World Bank, 2004; Herrera et al., 2005; Lagomarsino, 2006). However, the country-wide spreading of this pauperization process resulted in an unprecedented upsurge in emigration flows, following a distinct pattern from the earlier, US-centred migration system. As of now, Ecuador has the relatively highest amount of emigrants in the US and Europe, overall, within the Andean region (Flacso, 2008).

While emigration from Ecuador had already involved the US, on a lesser scale, since the sixties (Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002), the 1998-99 crisis has marked a significant change in this respect, both in quantitative and in qualitative terms. Before that critical phase, international migration from the country was a relatively isolated phenomenon, mostly concerning lower rural classes in a few Southern Andean provinces. Since the late nineties, instead, migration has turned into a pervasive social fact, occurring throughout the geographic areas and the social classes of the country:

Emigration, until a few years ago a relatively infrequent phenomenon, has now assumed a crucial relevance for the whole country, in economic, political and social terms. From an isolated practice, mostly concentrated in some Southern *Sierra* areas, it has evolved into a survival social strategy involving the whole country. Migration has thus emerged as a novel phenomenon, as it applies to nearly any social stratum within the Ecuadorian society. (Cartillas sobre Migración, 2002)

This emigration increase is unprecedented, in so far as

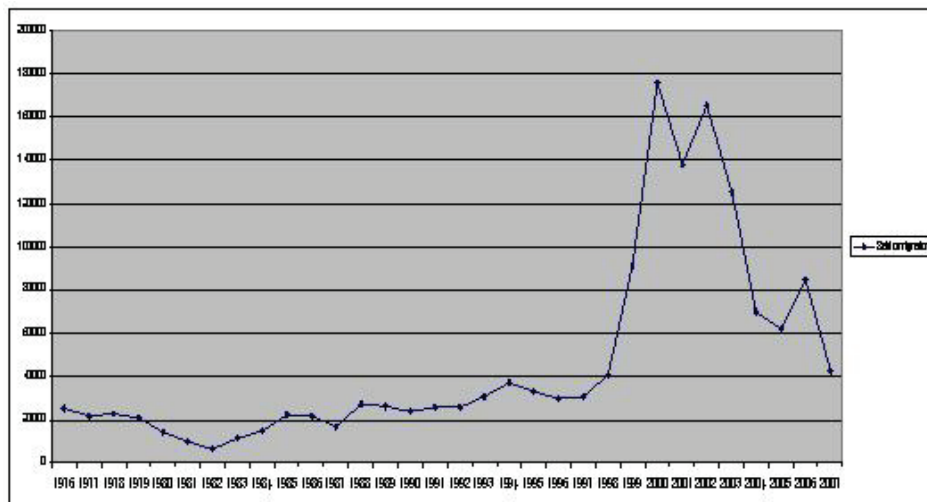
- every social class has been substantively involved, with especial respect to the middle and the middle-lower ones. As these were most affected by the economic crisis, and had relatively more resources to invest for leaving the country, an accelerated labour outflow – and a grassroots social construction of migration as a necessary tool to preserve one’s earlier life standards – has developed since 1998-1999;
- the new emigration wave has thrived not only in the Southern Andean provinces (i.e. Azuay, Canar, Loja), as in the past. It has rather taken root on a roughly similar pace in nearly every province of the country. This has given especial visibility to emigrant flows from the coast. As a result, the official amount of new emigrants in 1999-2000 has doubled, and even trebled when it comes to the coastal region of the country;
- while emigrant outflows until 1997 had been male-dominated, available statistics show a greater gender balance in the following years. Indeed, as Ecuadorian migration extends to European countries with a stronger demand for care and domestic work, women tend to migrate first more often than not;
- the diversification in the countries of settlement marks a further key change. While US-addressed migration has never really stopped (despite becoming increasingly difficult), Spain – and to a lesser extent other EU countries, first of all Italy – has emerged as an equally relevant destination.

After reaching the top value in 2000, however, emigrant flows from the country have relatively declined since 2004. The EU visa introduction, in 2003, has left no room for new immigrants as

overstayers (see figure 1). To be sure, official data on the country emigration balance do not account for unregistered outflows, being still a key, if risky pattern of Ecuadorian migration to the US. Even in Europe, by the way, there is reason to believe that the share of (still) undocumented Ecuadorian migrants is not an irrelevant one.

According to a recent study of a special Ecuadorian Commission for migration related statistics, expatriates accounted for 10-12% of the national population – that is, approximately a million and a half individuals – as of December, 2007 (FLACSO, 2008). While the estimate may be even too conservative, a list of the countries of settlement by the number of Ecuadorian communities (and even by the relevance of remittances) should include first of all Spain and the US, each estimated to host – at the end of 2008 – little less than half a million Ecuadorian citizens (Jokisch and Kyle, 2008; Pajares, 2009).

Figure 1 – Official net emigration from Ecuador, annual amounts, 1976-2007 (source: Dirección Nacional de Migración – elaboration by Flacso, 2008)



### 3. Grimmer perspectives overseas, vs. the resilience of migrant networks: insights from Ecuadorian migration to Europe

That the current recession has resulted in a significant deterioration of immigrant life conditions is, generally speaking, hardly contestable. Factors accounting for this include the inherent vulnerability of their status, compared to natives; their over-concentration in the low-skilled, labour-intensive and poorly competitive layers of the job market; their often above-average levels of indebtedness, typically due to house-related mortgages, but also to more ordinary needs for consumption and possibly, at the very roots, to debts contracted in order to emigrate. The impact of the global crisis on migration, however, should not lead to neglect the scope for migrants’ individual and collective agency. The focus should rather be on “the intersection of institutional incentive structures and the strategic decisions of migrants themselves” (Freeman, 2004). A proper framework of analysis should include, along with migrants’ trajectories of incorporation in the labour markets overseas, the role of public policies (both of receiving and of sending countries), the mediation provided by civil society organizations and – of course – the import of migrants’ own reaction to their worsening conditions.

In principle, the impingements of the global recession can be helpfully analyzed in several connected respects (Martin, 2009; Castles and Vezzoli, 2009). We will now approach those for which more evidence is available,<sup>4</sup> in order to take stock of the evolution of Ecuadorian migration to Europe. For each of them, a key challenge lies in distinguishing, insofar as possible, the cyclical effects of the 2008-2009 crisis from pre-existent, longer term trends in immigrant patterns of incorporation.

### *3.1 Rising unemployment rates*

Among the short term effects of the crisis, rising unemployment, with migrants being on average more vulnerable than native populations, is a key fact. When it comes to Ecuadorian migration in the EU, this is especially the case in Spain, where unemployment rates have almost doubled between 2007 and 2009 – currently being at about 14%, but reaching values above 20% for non-EU migrants (Pajares, 2009). At the same time the deterioration is far from homogeneous, as some productive sectors – first of all construction and manufacturing – have suffered particularly heavy job losses. Even so, the demand for immigrant labour is still high in some specific labour market segments, where a peculiar immigrant concentration has produced a niche effect (Gratton, 2007). This applies, for instance, to fruit harvesting in Spain, or to domestic carework in Italy.

Even in the most affected sectors, moreover, the current stagnation does not necessarily imply a sustained low demand of immigrant labour, in the medium run. Having said of migrants' higher vulnerability, attention should also be given to their typically higher potential for re-adaptation within the labour market, stemming from their peculiar patterns of territorial and sectoral mobility (Migration Policy Institute, 2009; Orozco, 2009; see also, on the Spanish case, Pajares, 2009).

### *3.2 Falling remittances*

Remittances are a key terrain for making sense of the recession-migration nexus, as they are, in a sense, a further source of immigrants' over-vulnerability, compared to native populations. Quoting Orozco (2009: 19),

The [2008-2009] crisis has manifested itself in three ways at least: a decrease in consumptions, a lack of credit access, an increase in unemployment rates. Emigrants are coping with difficulties similar to those of the rest of the population, with especial respect to the growth of unemployment, the fall of consumptions and the decline of their own savings. However, their obligations to the family members left behind keep being an important duty to them.

A rich sociological literature has cast light, in the last decades, on the structural embeddedness of remittances in transnational affection and morality regimes, whose development does not necessarily follow a strictly economic rationality (e.g. Guarnizo, 2003; Cohen, 2005). To that extent, the migrants' scope for remittances does not necessarily contract in full proportion with an economic downturn. Nevertheless, a relative decrease in the global amount of remittance flows has been clearly documented since fall 2008 at least. The current World Bank projections

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<sup>4</sup> A further indicator, mentioned in most literature reviews on the recession-migration nexus, concerns a relative increase in hostility and immigrant stigmatization, on the side of native populations. While the process may be indeed a relevant one, it can hardly be assumed – as of now, at least – as a specific output of the recent recession. It should rather be understood as more deep-seated process, with more and more diverse roots than the economic recession alone.

suggest an overall remittance decline by 7-10% in 2009, with Latin America being especially exposed, as a result of increased unemployment rates in the US.

Yet, in a context of accelerated financial and economic crisis, such figures show a relative *resilience* of remittance flows. Suffice it to say that private flows to developing countries in 2009 are expected to pass through a much more severe contraction, by 50% at least (Ratha et al., 2009). Even under critical conditions, in other words, remittances act as a valuable buffer mechanism for emigration countries. Altogether, their fall may be due to a lesser potential for remittance-sending by new emigrants (or by their actual decrease), more than to lower remittance flows by “the stock of [already residing] migrants, [whose position] has been relatively unaffected by the crisis” (cit.: 1). At the same time, while their current decline is in stark contrast to their remarkable raise in the 2001-2008 time-span, the latter may have also been due to statistical improvements in measuring money flows – rather than only reflecting a net currency increase (Orozco, 2009: 13).

The estimated amount of remittances in Ecuador, between 2001 and 2008, has been equivalent to 5.87% of the GDP – the highest rate in Southern America, apart from Bolivia (Orozco, 2009). The figure is telling about the serious impact of such a negative trend, at various levels: on recipient families, on the national budget overall, even on the trade and credit system, as a fall in the demand for goods and services, as well as in bank deposits, is the eventual output of dropping remittances. Ecuadorian Central Bank figures report the remittance growth in 2007 (+5.5%) as much lesser than in the previous year (+19.3%), while the trend of their total value in 2008 – some 2,822 USD millions – has actually been a negative one (-8.6%). The trend is estimated to be even worse in 2009 (-27% in the first quarter of the year) (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2009). The 2008-09 relative deterioration of remittances to Ecuador has been significantly more accentuated than in most LAC countries, judging from the estimates of Orozco (2009). Such a large remittance decrease is obviously related to the overconcentration of Ecuadorian emigrants in the US and in Spain. Apart from its predictable negative effects, however, a lower circulation of remittances in the country may also act as a curb on imported goods for consumption, indirectly causing a positive contribution to the current account balance (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2009: 13).

### *3.3 New emigration slowdown – and back home?*

As a result of a large-scale recession, a significant decrease of new arrivals – or even a U-turn altogether – could also be expected. In the case of Ecuador, as the previous section showed, a relative immigration slowdown has already occurred since 2003, basically due to the introduction of a visa requirement to enter the EU. No figures are yet available, as of now, on the very latest trends. Even so, a further deceleration, prompted by the bad job prospects in Spain, could prove relatively smaller than one would expect following a strictly economic rationale. The main channel for Ecuadorian immigration to that country is clearly provided, by now, by family reunification – a migration pattern less strictly contingent on the labour market conditions than individual labour migrant flows (Castles and Vezzoli, 2009).

Particularly uncertain prospects apply to Ecuadorian undocumented migrants. The latter, while estimated to be still in a significant number in Spain and elsewhere (FLACSO, 2008), are clearly not eligible for the governmental incentives to unemployed return (see below). In spite of being even more vulnerable to the economic downturn than their documented counterparts, they may find return to Ecuador a still less convenient and reversible option (Martin, 2009).

Altogether, the now unfavourable prospects for the Ecuadorians already settled in Europe, not to mention novel immigrants, should be pitted against the resilience of migrant networks: in other words, the potential for the cumulative development of immigrant flows overseas, provided they reach a critical threshold – one which often corresponds to their family legal settlement overseas (Massey et al., 1998). The very development of a novel migration system between Ecuador and Spain, since the late nineties, has resulted in a spontaneous grassroots dynamic, accelerated by the crisis in the country of origin (and of course, by a strong labour demand related to the economic boom in Spain) with poor, if any, institutional mediation (Herrera et al., 2005). Although the 2003 visa introduction did slow down this immigrant flow, and despite the pre-existent agreement on “legal migration” between the two countries (Hanson, 2009: 1), the bulk of Ecuadorian immigration to Spain developed out of any real political control – unless in the retroactive terms of amnesties for overstayers.

Another crucial issue concerns the relative prospects migrants would encounter, once back home (Migration Policy Institute, 2009). While, from the angle of receiving countries, a massive recession-related unemployment could be understood as reasonable grounds for migrants’ return, a more comprehensive view – including also migrants’ perceived prospects, once back home – leaves much more room for doubts. The opportunities for migrants’ re-integration in the motherland need thus to be considered, as well as the construction of such opportunities in the Ecuadorian public discourse.

#### **4. Enough to get back?**

Overall, the nexus between a global recession and higher immigrant unemployment, producing also a relative decrease of remittances (in the short term at least), is self-evident. Another potential implication of the crisis, on a national basis, is however far from clear: a significant rise in return migration flows. This section attempts to assess the prospects for Ecuador in the regard.

“Return migration”, Rogers (2009: 38) argues, “is more closely associated with conditions in the country of return than the country of residence, and particularly with the ease of circulation between the two”. Indeed, in a case of large-distance migration such as the Ecuadorian, both expatriation and repatriation – given the costs involved – are much less reversible than migrants themselves may expect. As the structural economic vulnerability in the country of origin is added up to this, a case can be reasonably made against a scenario of massive return migration. Yet, ironically, return migration has been gaining salience – in the public discourse at least – both in Ecuador and in Spain (Boccagni, 2009b). While there are obvious differences between the two countries, concerning their political agendas, interests and even understandings of the phenomenon, a parallel analysis can shed light on the scope for return migration from Europe to Ecuador – and indeed, on the functions that a return-centred discourse may perform in the public arena, both “here” and “there”.

##### *4.1 The appeal of the motherland, or of the past: rhetoric and facts in the Ecuadorian Plan “Welcome Home”*

A novel public discourse on emigration has been recently emerging in Ecuador, against a background of increasing vulnerability to the effects of recession (e.g. concerning remittances) and of growing immigration from Peru and Colombia (Araujo and Eguigurén, 2009).

Unprecedented emphasis has been put on migrant return as an evocative catchword and, to a far lesser degree, as a new objective of emigrant policies. As one enters the website of the new emigrant dedicated Ministry, the Secretaría Nacional del migrante (SENAMI), the catchword is right there: “We are arranging home for you to be able to return”.<sup>5</sup>

The drastic acceleration in emigration flows, after the 1998-1999 crisis, has been reframed also as an effect – indeed, a fault – of the bad administration of past Ecuadorian governments, fraught with pervasive corruption and systematically prone to patronage and clientelism. In front of this critical (but altogether realistic) account of Ecuadorian politics, the current president has ushered in a “citizen revolution” strategy. A novel discursive emphasis on the national pride and allegiance of every citizens – including expatriates – is consistent with the ultimate aim of re-establishing political institutions’ credibility, and citizens’ confidence in the State (along with their loyalty to the national government).

As we found during our fieldwork in Ecuador, past electoral campaigns of the political party now at the government (Alianza País) have deliberately followed a widespread expectation to enhance and further develop “Ecuadorianness” – meaning by this both a communal framework of identification, and a civic duty of patriotism. To be sure, the novel public rhetoric is driven also by far more pragmatic stances (cf. Barry, 2006): a strategic expectation to facilitate expatriates’ remittances (and to a lesser extent their investments), along with an attempt to deter further emigration – even more so as it may expand the scope for skill and brain drain processes.

The fact remains that a public discourse centred around homeland attachments seems to have still a strong hold over the Ecuadorian population, not to mention emigrants. Significantly, a sort of worldwide appeal can be read on the SENAMI website, with an unprecedented celebrative emphasis on the worthy self-sacrifice of emigrants and on their almost natural connectedness to the motherland:

Compatriots, Homeland is love, which only ardent-hearted men can build at a distance.

Homeland is you, lucid-minded women who understood that love cannot be forgotten, whatever the distance.

Homeland is you, young emigrants who, with your clean hands, sowed the land you left with your work and dreams.

Homeland is the common good, which past governments withheld to you, thus obliging you to leave the Ecuadorian soil, searching for opportunities in remote places.

It is within this cultural context that both the novel exercise of external voting, and the start of an expatriates-addressed Return plan should be understood (Ramírez and Boccagni, 2008). The latter programme, soon renamed “Welcome Home”, includes an institutional range of initiatives and projects, with a declared view to protecting and supporting Ecuadorian citizens overseas. The plan is fruit, in discursive terms at least, of an approach to migration based on human rights and free circulation principles, as opposed to the increasingly restrictive stance underlying both EU and US immigration policies – in their standard representations at least.<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, president Correa begun to approach the whole of expatriates as inhabitants of an evocative, non-territorially based “Fifth Region”, to be added to the four geographical areas of the country.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the SENAMI website at [www.senami.gov.ec](http://www.senami.gov.ec). See also the governmental platform aiming at enhancing transnational communication with expatriates, at [www.migranteecuadoriano.gov.ec](http://www.migranteecuadoriano.gov.ec).

<sup>6</sup> In the case of Ecuador, this potentially groundbreaking approach has been somewhat substantiated in the new Constitution (2008), claiming, *inter alia*, “human mobility” as an inherently personal right, and “universal citizenship” as a longed-for normative principle of international relations (art. 40, 416 – cf. also Boccagni, 2008).

As of now the Welcome Home plan has resulted in the implementation of several initiatives, including facilitations to returnees, support to highly vulnerable emigrants (including the undocumented and deported ones) and an orientation to enhance connectedness between expatriates and the motherland. Three programmes are especially worth highlighting:

1.) *Ties* (“Vinculos”), which aims to strengthen the opportunities and the mechanism of emigrants’ involvement and communication with the motherland. By investing also in migrant grassroots associations, as well as in their family members’ collective initiatives in Ecuador, the programme aspires to “promote the transfer and the generation of general conditions which facilitate the economic, social and cultural development of the country”;

2.) *El Cucayo*, a public fund expected to stimulate and orientate returnees’ productive investments, by means of a technical and legal assistance, as well as through micro-funds for the start-up of new entrepreneurial initiatives;

3.) *Returning home* (“Volver a casa”), a programme aiming to support emigrants’ physical return by facilitating, via tax exemption, the transport of their personal belongings and of their professional equipments.

A remarkable public investment has been made since the beginning, in each of these respects, in emigrant-addressed information and communication flows, drawing on a variety of traditional mass-media and of new ICTs (including virtual social networks and online TV channels). At the same time, following the model of the previous Plan Migración, Comunicación y Desarrollo – a co-development, Spain-supported initiative (Hall, 2005) –, specific *telecentros* have been established: institutional centres facilitating, whether abroad or in Ecuador, migrants’ (and their family members’) access to the internet, and training them to a basic ICTs use.

Having said of the state significant investment, and of the unprecedented communication flows mediated above all by the internet, none of the programmes mentioned above has apparently affected the real scope for return to occur on a “worthy and sustainable basis”, as the official rhetoric has it.<sup>7</sup> Altogether, such initiatives may be more helpfully understood as symbolic tools, implemented with a view to enhancing Ecuadorians’ collective self-esteem and national identifications – both severely questioned by the nineties’ economic collapse, and by the ensuing large-scale emigration (Goycochea, Ramírez Gallegos 2002). Remarkably, the governmental discourse concerning these programmes has changed significant nuances in the last couple of years – perhaps also due the effects of the world recession and of the limited short-term progress achieved in the terrain of health and education services, as well as of urban security. By the way, all these factors would be crucial, along with better employment opportunities, to induce greater emigrants’ investments in Ecuador and, altogether, a significant return migration trend.

As the current version of the SENAMI website is compared with the past ones, a remarkable shift in the discursive emphasis can be noticed – pointing towards a notion of return which is in fact a symbolic, much more than an effective one. While, at the very inception, the *Plan Retorno*

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<sup>7</sup> As one delves into the SENAMI website, the figures available – although largely incomplete – do support this conclusion. As of June, 2009 (almost one year and a half after the Plan’s start), some 7,200 households have benefited from some institutional helping programme – half of them deported, or returning, thanks to a SENAMI agreement with the IOM. Some 1,700 household have actually been recipients of the “Returning Home” initiative, while around 1,700 individuals had got access to the Cucayo Fund projects (resulting in about 80 new entrepreneurial activities). SENAMI has also provided for the repatriation of the body of nearly one hundred co-nationals deceased overseas.

presentation reflected a clear expectation to stimulate a physical return of emigrant families, the current institutional account reads as follows:

Return can be understood in a broad sense. Rather than necessarily implying physical return home, it involves a wider recovery of the cultural, political, professional and economic capabilities of the millions of our fellow-citizens, who spontaneously contribute, through their own efforts, to the advancement of our society.<sup>8</sup>

A reflection is worth making on the use of the adverb “spontaneously”. This seems to contradict two central elements of the mainstream governmental discourse: first, the predominant role of the economic and political crisis, almost compelling the last decade’s emigration (somewhat denying, in this new official account, the significance of migrants’ agency); second, the significant progress, supposedly already made in the overall life conditions back home – which would make migrant contribution a matter of generous “spontaneity”, rather than a necessary supplement to the strivings for livelihood of their family members left behind. To be sure, a U-turn trend has recently taken place in the state social expenses (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2009), compared to past welfare investments being miserable even by LAC standards (Herrera, 2008). A relatively sustained economic growth has also occurred in the country up to 2008, in spite of its structural reliance on oil revenues and on basic agricultural exports (and in fact, even more than on the latter, on emigrant remittances). The huge external debt has relatively decreased – in terms of GDP percentage –, being also at the centre, more recently, of an unprecedented and apparently successful negotiation process with international creditors (Acosta, 2009). Yet, Ecuador’s prospects for development are mixed to say the least – whether in a social, economic or financial realm. No wonder emigrants should be aware, and often disenchanted about that, whatever the public appeals to their novel “Fifth Region” dignity.

An especially successful slogan, marking the public presentation of the Welcome Home plan, contends that “the first way of returning is a return to feel Ecuadorian”. This is likely to be a necessary condition; one indeed, that not even the 90s’ crisis did really undermine (Boccagni, 2009a). It is, however, by no means sufficient to make return an actually promising way forward – rather than a solution related to some “migration failure”, more often than not (Boccagni, 2009b).

#### *4.2 Helping them to return, forcing them to stay behind: rationale and viability of the Spanish “Plan of help to voluntary return”*

There is a striking commonality, as the literature shows, in most of the initiatives promoted by receiving states (often supported by international institutions) to encourage labour migrant return: a low, or anyway lesser than expected impact (King, 1999; Cassarino, 2004).

Judging from the preliminary, if telling evidence available for now (Pajares, 2009),<sup>9</sup> this is likely to apply also to the Spanish *Plan de Ayuda al Retorno Voluntario*. The initiative was started in fall, 2008, as a governmental reaction to the increasing unemployment rates of immigrant workers – resulting in a higher welfare demand and, above all, in a greater potential for friction with the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the website references in note 5.

<sup>9</sup> After four months since the Plan’s inception, as of March, 2009, some 3,700 unemployed immigrants had applied for it (Pajares, 2009). Remarkably, the Ecuadorians amounted to nearly 50% of applicants, and could arguably rely - as the previous sessions suggests - on some more incentives from their national government than, say, Moroccans or Colombians. Even so, the figure corresponds to a minimal part only of the unemployed from the Andean country. A case could even be made for a relatively higher rate of Ecuadorian returnees among bi-national citizens, who have no law constraint on further mobility between the two countries.

native (unemployed) population. This return-bonus programme is targeted to unemployed immigrants from non-EU countries having a social security agreement with Spain. Recipients can have access to a jobseekers' allowance for 6 to 18 months, provided they voluntarily return to their motherland. Henceforth they cannot be admitted legally back for three years. Beneficiaries, who are also covered the travel expenses to their countries of origin, have also a preferential right to enter the annual labour immigration quotas – five years, however, after returning home. As all commentators agree, the ban to re-enter the country for a substantive time-span has discouraged a significant immigrant participation (Rogers, 2009: 39). Joining the programme, in this perspective, would make further emigration less viable – much more so from very distant countries, such as Ecuador.

Remarkably, both employer associations and trade unions – not to mention migrant associations – showed scepticism on the programme since the beginning, although on different grounds and for distinct interests (Martin, 2009: 8). Well before the low take-up of the Plan was manifest, a disjuncture had emerged once again between the immigration agenda of the economic and civil society actors, and that of policy makers. The latter struggle to cope with the public opinion pressures for harsher migration management, as well as with the risk of increasing unemployment to undermine the rationale of the past massive resort to the foreign labour force.

As Plewa (2009: 12, 2) concludes,

The main incentive to return – repatriation bonus – was tied to unemployment benefits accumulated by a migrant. This had two implications. First, undocumented migrants or those who had exhausted their unemployment benefits by the time the programme went into effect were not provided with any incentives to return. Second, the programme was most appealing to those migrants who could depart immediately, e.g. those without family in Spain. [...] [In fact,] while the Voluntary Return Programme was budget-friendly, it limited itself to assist those migrants who were from the very outset of the crisis willing to leave Spain.

While the Plan is potentially more appealing for single migrants than for those settled with a family overseas, and for older workers (closer to retirement) than for their younger counterparts, a question remains: could anyway a State-led initiative do more than that, in promoting migrant voluntary return? The scope for effective repatriation policies seems however small, and the agenda driving them a more ambivalent one. In this perspective, the Spanish apparent failure to induce a significant return flow, even under apparently benign conditions for migrant themselves, is but an instance of the limits inherent in the action of liberal-democratic states, vis-à-vis migrants' own decisions and initiative – even under tighter constraints, such as in the current circumstances. As Castles and Vezzoli (2009) put it,

If migrants have long residence and strong family ties, have invested in education and housing, and can benefit from welfare payments, then they will be likely to endure through the crisis rather than take the risk to return to the origin country.

Altogether, return programmes in Ecuador and Spain, while implemented simultaneously, have been informed by very different understandings of return migration – and of course, by diverging political interests. Bearing in mind this ultimate divergence, the scope for co-development policies between the two countries, despite the novel salience of this development discourse (Cortés and Torres, 2009), proves limited. Still, a significant commonality between the return initiatives promoted by Ecuador and Spain lies in their “hidden agendas” (Castles, 2004) – that is, in the actual relevance of aims that go beyond the officially stated ones. For Ecuador, the

issue at stake is rather a reassertion of the national pride and identity, and of course a search for consensus to the current administration (and for expatriates' remittances), via an inclusive, evocative and rights-based construction of "Ecuadorianness" (Boccagni and Lagomarsino, 2010). In the case of Spain, the demonstration effect of the Voluntary Return Plan is probably expected to be stronger than its real output. The rationale of the programme is rather contingent on the need to exhibit a commitment in alleviating immigrant unemployment. The measure adopted may be easily acceptable for left-wing voters, by virtue of its humanitarian appearance. It is likely to be criticized as irrelevant or detrimental, however, by the right-wing opposition. For either country, a domestic policy-related need to respond to national constituencies, rather than a strategic expectation to produce significant outputs, is arguably the key driving force of return migration policies.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of being the smallest country in the Andean region, with a relatively short emigration history, Ecuador is a model case for analyzing the evolution of international migration, against the current worldwide recession. The very 1997-1998 crisis was one of the factors at the roots of the latest emigration wave from the country, which spurred totally new migration flows, with significant impingements on the social-economic arrangements of the country of origin and, then, of the destination ones. The significant demand for cheap labour in the latter countries (especially applying to domestic work, social care, agricultural work) has favourably affected the development, and then the stabilization, of this novel migration system – to an extent that neither the current recession (if serious), nor migration policies are likely to drastically undermine it.

There is a question underlying all the remarks we have made so far, which could be posed as follows: what if a State-led strategy enhancing connectedness with expatriates – by now, just an instance of a widespread political development (Barry, 2006; Gamlen, 2008) – interlocks with a global scale recession?

As far as Ecuadorian migration is concerned the answer is clear, at least for the short run. On the one hand, the new governmental emphasis on emigrants' return coexists with the factual evidence that this is not taking place on a massive scale (nor, after all, it is expected, let alone desired, to). It needs, therefore, to be primarily understood in a logic of domestic politics, underpinned by a strategic interest to develop emigrants' connectedness on different grounds. On the other hand, from migrants' viewpoint, the potential opportunities inherent in staying overseas exceed the perceived benefits of return. Even as more immigrants are (provisionally) unemployed or underemployed, they can still rely, especially in Europe, on the basic social protection provided by the public welfare and by "pro-immigrant" civil society initiatives (Piper, 2009). Although Ecuador has developed an emigrant-friendly public discourse, and relatively benign policies for returnees, the structure of opportunities overseas generally remains – and is perceived as – less disadvantageous than in the motherland. The family reunification and stabilization processes, which have increasingly taken place in the last decade, also discourage a massive return, against the lack of short term prospects of further migration. Once labour migration is appreciated as a partially self-feeding process, an internal diversification in immigrant stocks overseas – with an increasing incidence of reunited migrants' family members – is more likely than a significant decrease overall (Dobson et al., 2009).

A plausible short-run scenario for Ecuadorian migration, therefore, involves less a decline in real numbers, than a deterioration in migrants' relative opportunities – and, as a consequence, in those of their family members still behind. In a nutshell, as Duvell (2009) puts it, “the economic crisis will not generate a migration crisis but rather turn out to be an individual crisis for migrants and their families at home”. When it comes to understanding the aggregate and cumulative impact of such “individual crises”, the focus of analysis shifts to a more complex, and mixed, medium-long run scenario.

Uncertainty still dominates, concerning the actual pace and steps of recovery from the global recession – and, for that matter, on the prospects of the precarious institutional and economic arrangements in Ecuador. A basic conclusion could apply, as of now, also to our case study: all in all, “only a severe and protracted recession could have a substantial, long-term effect on migration flows” (Migration Policy Institute, 2009: 6).

As a final remark, a helpful distinction could be traced between the time-scale of a cyclical, if severe crisis, and the time-scale of a transnational migration system, such as the one between Ecuador and the EU. As a system, this can by now rely upon a range of grassroots, far-reaching social networks, which mirror individual endeavours for mobility, and significant biographical investments, somewhat resilient to – or at least, changing slower than – the economic deterioration induced by the current recession.

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