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Colombian migration to Europe:  
Political transnationalism in the  
middle of conflict <sup>(1)</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines Colombian migration to Europe, and more specifically the United Kingdom and Spain, two examples of the growing diversity and complexity of international migration flows. More specifically, the paper focuses on the transnational political practices of Colombian migrants in these two destinations with two aims. One is to contribute to the emergent field of transnational migration studies by going beyond traditional analyses of transnational political practices to include a wide variety of initiatives and activities that help maintain and boost migrants' involvement with the political life in their home country. The second is to provide a case study of the potential role that transnational communities and diasporas can play in conflict resolution in their societies of origin.

**Keywords:** Transnational migration, diasporas, transnational political practices, civil society, conflict, Latin America, Colombia.

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## Introduction

In the third edition of their classic text, Castles and Miller (2003, p.1) describe the growing significance of international migration and transnational networks as key aspects of globalisation and “one of the defining features of the post-Cold War era”. According to a recent report, there are currently some 191 million migrants in the world, up from an estimated 174 million in 2000 and 100 million in 1960, although these figures could be much higher taking into account ‘irregular’ migration (El País, 7 June 2006; UNHCR, 2006; IOM, 2005). Latin America has one of the world’s highest emigration rates, but compared with other some regions the study of Latin American migration has received less attention (Clark et al., 2004). Historically, the region has been mainly one of immigration. However, during the second half of the 20th century, Latin America became predominantly a region of emigration. Migration flows have been mostly intra-regional and towards the United States, but in recent years Europe has become a key destination (Pellegrino, 2001; IOM, 2005; Martínez Pizarro, 2003). Although the presence of Latin Americans in Europe dates back to the Independence era, Latin American migration to Europe only started to grow rapidly by the mid-1960s, and especially since the 1980s and 1990s (Pellegrino, 2004). Amongst the nationalities most prominent in these migration flows are Colombians.

Colombia has a long history of violence, inequalities and more recently economic difficulties, but it was not until relatively recent that the country became one of the main sources of emigrants from Latin America <sup>(2)</sup>. In addition, Colombia has the world's second-largest internally displaced population, the result mainly of more than 40 years of internal armed conflict (UNHCR, 2006). Although the phenomenon of internal displacement in Colombia has received increased attention from NGOs, international organisations, policy-makers and academics, by contrast Colombian migration and asylum abroad has largely been ignored despite its growing significance. In this paper I will focus on the migration of Colombians to Spain and the United Kingdom, the two European countries with the largest Colombian communities. Although less important in quantitative terms compared with the more established community in the United States, these two collectives represent one of the newest and most dynamic flows in Colombian emigration. The emphasis will be on the transnational political practices of Colombians in Spain and the United Kingdom, with the aim of contributing to the fast-growing debate and literature on transnational approaches to migration, and more specifically to explore the potential role that the growing Colombian diaspora<sup>(3)</sup> could play in the transformation of the conflict affecting the country. Civil society can and often does play an important role in situations of armed conflict, conflict resolution and post-conflict. It follows that in the current context of the growing importance of transnational practices,

diaspora communities can also contribute to civil conflict transformation in their societies of origin (Zunzer, 2004).

## **A Colombian diaspora in the making**

### ***Latin Americans in Europe***

Latin America has a long history of both in- and out-migration. Historically, the region has been mainly one of immigration, receiving people from Europe, Africa and Asia, with emigration happening mostly intra-regionally and across borders. However, during the second half of the 20th century, Latin America became predominantly a region of emigration. Emigration was mostly intra-regional (with the main recipient countries being Argentina, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Mexico) and towards the United States (Pellegrino, 2001). A combination of deteriorating economic opportunities in the region from the 1960s onwards, and especially from the 1980s due to economic crises and the effects of Structural Adjustment Programmes, together with the political strife in the Southern Cone and other countries, meant that intra-regional migration stagnated while migration flows to the United States and other developed countries increased. This pattern has continued, with recent reports citing Spain, Portugal, Italy, Israel and Japan as amongst the most popular current destinations for migrants from Latin America, including those from Colombia (IOM, 2005; Martínez Pizarro, 2003).

### ***The development of Colombian mass migration***

the mass migration of Colombians, especially in the last 15 years, has transformed Colombia into a transnational social formation. This means that both civil society and the exercise of power through the State go beyond the territorial borders of the nation (Guarnizo, 2003, p.25).<sup>(4)</sup>

Compared to other countries in Latin America, Colombia does not have a strong tradition of either emigration or immigration. However, in recent decades the country has become a major source of migrants in the region (IOM, 2003a). Rates of emigration have been increasing since the 1960s and 1970s, as people left the country for socio-economic reasons or to escape the growing violence. However, since the 1990s, due to the deteriorating economic and social conditions caused by recession and the implementation of neoliberal policies, together with the persistent high levels of political violence and crime caused by over 40 years of armed conflict as well as the illegal

drugs trade, migration in Colombia has taken a significant new meaning. The latest census (May 2005-May 2006) calculates that out of a total population of 41,242,948, as many as 3,331,107 Colombians live abroad, but other estimates put this figure at 4-5 million (or one in ten of the national population) (DANE, 2006).<sup>(5)</sup> According to UN data the number of Colombian refugees has also grown significantly since the 1990s, with the U.S. Committee for Refugees (2005, p.11) estimating that there were some 263,000 Colombian refugees by the end of 2004. In addition, an estimated 2-3 million Colombians are internally displaced, the second-largest internally-displaced population in the world after Sudan (UNHCR, 2006). Despite this, Colombian migrants and refugees have received little attention, although the situation of the internally displaced has been more amply documented.

According to Guarnizo (2003), the growth in numbers is not the only novelty in Colombian migration. Also important is the increase in the diversity of the regional origin and social background of the migrants, as well as in the plurality of migration routes and destinations reached in the last few years. Traditionally, Colombian emigration has been intra-regional, mainly to Venezuela (since the 1930s), and to the United States (since the 1950s) (Pearce, 1990). There are an estimated 2 million Colombians living in Venezuela, while the number of Colombians in the US could be between 500,000 to over 2 million (IOM, 2003a; Semana, 6 November 2001).<sup>(6)</sup> However, in the last few years, key destinations have diversified to include countries such as Ecuador and Costa Rica in the region, and Canada and West European countries (mainly Spain) extra regionally. Data from the latest census indicates that out of all Colombians permanently residing abroad, 35.3% live in the United States, 23.4% in Spain and 18.5% in Venezuela (DANE, 2006). According to an article by Semana (30 November 2003), between the 1960s and the 1980s, Europe was only a destination for the Colombian elite, as well as some refugees, intellectuals, artists and students. By the mid-1970s, as the UK government authorised the arrival of non-skilled migrants to work in services, between 4,000-10,000 Colombians, mostly women, arrived in England as temporary workers. Finally, from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, as the economic and political situation in Colombia deteriorated, there is a third wave of emigration towards the United States, Canada, Europe (mainly Spain) and Central America. The very few studies of Colombian migration available have tended to focus on flows to the United States, but as the importance of settlement in European countries increase so does interest in these new migrant communities.

## ***Colombians in Spain and the United Kingdom***

The United Kingdom and Spain are home to the two largest communities of Colombians in Europe, although there are also sizeable groups in France, Italy and Germany (Pellegrino, 2004). In the case of the United Kingdom, the Colombian, and larger Latin American, community is not very visible compared with other groups, given the lack of historical links between the two countries, and its relatively newness and small size (Bermúdez Torres, 2003). Despite this, it seems that Colombian migration to Europe in significant numbers was directed first towards the United Kingdom, with Spain becoming a key destination only more recently.<sup>(7)</sup> Spain was formerly, together with the rest of Southern Europe, a “reservoir of migrant labour” (Montanari and Cortese, 1993, p.275). Migration flows to Spain only turned positive from around the mid-1980s, a situation that accelerated in the 1990s and the beginnings of the 21st century (Esteban, 2004). In both countries, the origins of Latin American migration is associated with the arrival first of political refugees in the 1960s and 1970s. Following these, a larger number of Latin Americans, including Colombians, began to arrive in search of employment or escaping the political situation in their countries.

Although real numbers are hard to find, given the high levels of ‘irregularity’ within the community in both countries, a study published in 2000 estimated that the Colombian population in the United Kingdom was between 30,000-50,000, accounting for about half of the Latin American community (Open Channels, 2000).<sup>(8)</sup> On the other hand, data from the UK census for 2001, quoted by the BBC Born Abroad Project, suggests that the number of people from South America living in Britain has gone up from 34,518 in 1991 to 76,412 in 2001 (a 121% increase), with Brazilians cited as the fastest growing community within this group.<sup>(9)</sup> However, taking into account ‘irregular’ migration, these numbers could be much higher. For instance, according to the former Colombian consul in London, the actual number of Colombians living in the United Kingdom could reach 100,000 or more, becoming the second nationality in importance after Brazilians within the largest Latin American community. In the case of Spain, figures from the 2004 ‘Padrón Municipal’ put the number of Colombians resident in the country at 244,684. In addition, an estimated 60,000 Colombians could have benefited from ‘regularisation’ in 2005, although many more could have been left behind. An article from *El Tiempo* (7 May 2005) argues that less than 20% of the estimated 300,000-350,000 undocumented Colombians in Spain participated in the regularisation process. The only detailed study of Colombians living in Spain also suggests that a large proportion (around two-thirds) of the Colombian population in Spain are in an ‘irregular’ situation (IOM, 2003b).

Most Colombians in the United Kingdom have settled in or around London, where they are generally dispersed but with small concentrations in the boroughs of Lambeth, Islington, Southwark and Camden (Open Channels, 2000). By contrast, Colombians in Spain are more dispersed, having settled throughout most of the country, although the largest number by far live in Madrid province (more than a quarter), with a similar amount equally distributed between Cataluña and Valencia (see Table 1). There seems to be as well a close relationship between area of origin within Colombia and specific destinations in Spain, which reflects “the existence and key importance of migration networks based on family, community and friendship linkages” (IOM, 2003b, p.176). These networks and social capital can be key in the decision to migrate, the organisation of the trip, the support received upon arrival and the settlement of migrants. They are also reflected in the links maintained with the country and region of origin. An example of this is the growing importance of migrant remittances. In 2005, Colombia received an estimated 3.3 billion dollars in remittances, becoming the second main earner of foreign exchange (Semana, 26 February 2006; see also Garay and Rodríguez, 2005). Although research on transnational linkages between the Colombian diaspora and the homeland is very limited, the little evidence available point out that remittances are not the only activity in this field.

*Table 1: Distribution of the Colombian population in Spain (2004)*

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>244,684</b>
Madrid (Comunidad de)	72,466
Cataluña	35,521
Comunidad Valenciana	35,116
Canarias	18,705
Andalucía	16,370
Castilla-La Mancha	8,511
País Vasco	8,473
Balears (Illes)	8,464
Galicia	8,129
Castilla y León	8,099
Murcia (Región de)	6,053
Aragón	5,016
Navarra (Comunidad Foral de)	4,462
Cantabria	2,906
Rioja (La)	2,654
Asturias (Principado de)	2,340
Extremadura	1,384
Melilla	10
Ceuta	5

Source: Table supplied by the Colombian embassy in Madrid based on data from the 2004 Padrón Municipal.



## **Political ‘transnationalism from below’ and from above<sup>(10)</sup>**

Transnational approaches to migration were developed to move beyond the traditional emphasis “on the process of migration from and migration to particular nation states” to focus on how migrants “have complex relations to different locales and form new and different communities...involving social, symbolic and material ties between homelands, destinations and relations between destinations” (Anthias, 2000, p.21-22). This new way of looking at international migration did not emerge strongly until the second half of the 1990s, mainly in the context of Latin American labour migration to the United States, and is still a relatively under-researched field (Al-Ali et al., 2001).<sup>(11)</sup> For instance, in their pioneering work among Colombians in the United States, Guarnizo and Díaz (1999, p.397), identified “a dense web of economic, political, and socio-cultural transnational relations connecting migrants and their places of origin”. However, they were also cautious about these relations, pointing out that they do not necessarily lead to the formation of a ‘transnational community’. They found that Colombians in the United States, like many other migrant groups, were highly divided along class, regional, ethnic and other lines. In the case of Colombian migrants there was the added mistrust and fragmentation caused by the violence and criminality experienced at home, and the stereotypes confronted when living abroad (ibid; see also Guarnizo et al., 1999). This has been confirmed by other studies, and by the information collected during my current fieldwork (Bermúdez Torres, 2003; McIlwaine, 2005; Restrepo Vélez, 2006).

In their work on transnational political action amongst Latin Americans in the United States, Guarnizo et al. (2003, p.1219) argued that this distrust and fragmentation caused Colombians to avoid “continuous political engagement with their home nation”. Guarnizo (2003), in another report, point out that this also contributes to the lack of Colombian migrant organisations and groups that are wide and representative, and feeds into characteristics of the Colombian political culture such as the distrust of the State, low appreciation of the political parties and a general negative perception of the political process. Nevertheless, these appreciations are based on research focused on the most formal aspects of politics, such as affiliation to political parties and electoral participation. Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) points out that there are different definitions of transnational political practices, ranging from more inclusive ones to more strict ones.<sup>(12)</sup> Her definition includes activities “such as transnational election campaigns and cross-border voting, migrants’ rallies against injustices in the country of origin or demonstrations to defend it, or engagement in hometown associations’ projects in the region of origin” (ibid, p. 761; see also Martínez Saldaña, 2003). In my research with Colombians in Spain and the United Kingdom, I have

found evidence of several of these types of transnational political practices. Below, I explain some of them, with especial emphasis on 'homeland politics' – "migrants' and refugees' political activities pertaining to the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland" (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.762).

### ***The view from above***

The forces shaping the formation of transnational communities and their activities do not come only from below, i.e. the migrants themselves. The nation states from where these migrants departed often have a stake in maintaining links with its population abroad, whether for economic, political, cultural or other reasons (see Hazán, 2001, for examples in the Mexican and Colombian cases). This is bound to be even more true as experts analyse the linkages between migration and development, especially through the use of remittances (not only economic, but also social).<sup>(13)</sup> It is also a task made increasingly easy by the development of modern communication technologies, and the growing use of the internet.<sup>(14)</sup> As part of this growing interest, in 2003 the Colombian government launched 'Colombia Nos Une' (Colombia Unites Us), a project led by the foreign ministry that "seeks to strengthen the links with Colombian communities abroad, to recognise them as part of the nation, and to address them through public policy initiatives"<sup>(15)</sup> (Colombia Nos Une/Programa Colombia Nos Une/Objetivos). Its website offers information about Colombia and Colombians abroad, and practical details for Colombians abroad or those wishing to leave the country. The programme also cooperates with other similar private initiatives, for instance to promote donations from migrants abroad to social projects in Colombia. Although initiatives like this look promising, how they work in reality can be quite different. Among my interviewees, for instance, not many knew about Colombia Nos Une, and of those that had information about it not all thought highly of it, partly because the fact that it is a state-led initiative makes it highly suspicious.

Nevertheless, the launching of a programme like Colombia Nos Une is a sign not only of the growing interest in linking the diaspora with the home country, but also of the transnational linkages connecting different communities of Colombians abroad with each other. The most recent studies on Colombian migration have pointed to the growing links between communities in the United States and Europe, as well as between Colombians resident in different European countries, with many families having members distributed in different locations (Guarnizo, 2003). This is expressed in several ways: first, the extensive rights that the state has granted Colombians abroad, and the emergence of initiatives aimed at integrating migrants with their home country; second, the growing dependence of the country on migrant remittances; and third, the density of

the social, cultural, political and economic relationships that those abroad maintain with their families and communities of origin in Colombia (ibid, pp.25-26).

### ***Private-led initiatives to boost and maintain transnational linkages***

Colombia Nos Une is not the only web-based initiative launched to boost and maintain transnational linkages within the Colombian diaspora and with the home country. Several have been initiated from the private sector, one of the main ones being 'Conexion Colombia' (Connection Colombia), which according to its website is a:

mechanism to capture and channel ... the help and support of Colombians in Colombia, of the Colombian diaspora and of "friends of Colombia" in order to benefit the neediest sectors of society and to keep individuals connected with Colombia ... Colombians anywhere in the world can make donations in cash, in-kind or even contribute with their time and expertise in a particular field ... to high impact, non-profit foundations in Colombia, who work towards creating a positive social change ... it is also an ideal way for all Colombians to connect with their country and to create a network of individuals ready to help each other. This site allows Colombians everywhere to exchange academic information, look for jobs abroad, search financial sponsors for projects, listen to the latest music this in the country ... This is an innovative project worldwide which intends to create a network of continuous support for all those Colombians who wish to construct a society full of solidarity and who wish to understand that "being Colombian" is not a matter of being born in a country but a feeling carried within the heart. (Conexion Colombia/Acerca de Conexion Colombia/Que es Conexion Colombia).

This initiative was created by a group of private companies and organisations, and has the support of some public entities as well. It has existed for two years now and during this time it has received around 2 million dollars in donations and other resources from some 35 countries. Its headquarters are in Colombia, but it has representative offices in Mexico, New York and Madrid. The team in Madrid started in 2005, and is directed by a woman. They are seven people, six women and a man, most of them students and working on a voluntary basis. During a group discussion I held with four of the women, including the director, two issues emerged strongly as they explained what Conexion Colombia was and why they became involved. One was the need to keep in touch with the home country, and to continue with the same type of activities (or work) that they had done in Colombia. The other was the desire or obligation to give something back to the country of origin, especially if the person comes from a privileged background. Their way of doing this is seeking to improve social conditions in Colombia, and contributing to create a more positive image of their country abroad. In the words of a young woman working there:

I am now working and I am very happy in Conexión Colombia. I think it is very important that if I have had the opportunity to travel abroad, to see and learn different things, then I also must help other people in my country who have not had that opportunity, don't you think so? (interview conducted on 18 November 2005 in Madrid).<sup>(16)</sup>

Searching the internet, I have found some other similar web-based initiatives that have to do with Colombians abroad, and which sometimes work together. There is 'Yo Creo en Colombia' (I believe in Colombia), a foundation created in 1999 to 'empower' Colombians, for instance by promoting community associations, both inside and outside the country. Among its aims and objectives are to unite the Colombian diaspora, and to create more positive citizens who could contribute to change the country and to improve the image of Colombia abroad. 'Colombia es Pasión' (Colombia is Passion) is another initiative aimed at improving the image of Colombia abroad, mainly with economic ends (to attract investment, tourism, etc...). As part of their activities, they organise events abroad to promote Colombian products, and issue goods with their logo for Colombians all over the world to carry with pride. Another one is 'Colombianos en el Exterior' (Colombians Abroad), whose objectives seem to be also mostly economic.

### ***Organisations working with Colombians***

As research on Colombians in the United States points out, the communities in the United Kingdom and Spain are also divided by class, ideological and political differences, as well as fear and mistrust. In the case of Spain, it seems that compared to other nationalities, such as Ecuadoreans or Peruvians, Colombians are less organised. Although there are quite a lot of community activities going on, most of the groups and organisations behind them seem to be small and their work uncoordinated. There is also distrust among some migrants who see these groups as nothing more than individual initiatives created for self-benefit (a problem that affects NGOs in general). Nevertheless, it has to be taken into account that the community is still very recent, and as it becomes more established organisational levels could improve. Just in Madrid there seems to be some 14 groups or organisations, with seven or eight being the most prominent. Most of them work with Latin American migrants in general, or are open to any migrant group, while some are more Colombia-specific. Some as well have offices in other parts of Spain, or even in other countries (for instance, one has offices in the United Kingdom). In Barcelona, I did not find any specific organisation or group working with Colombian migrants, although I came into contact with at least three groups where Colombians worked together with locals and/or other migrants, some of them with an specific Colombia focus. In London I found at least one group of organised Colombians (Coras – Colombian Refugee Association), two organisations where Colombians,

English nationals and others worked together on human rights issues, as well as many of the Latin American-wide organisations working with migrants. Many of the latter were directed or staffed by Colombians, and the same can be said of the several community newspapers and radio stations that cater for the Spanish-speaking population in London.

Most of these groups practice what Østergaard-Nielsen (2003, p.762) defines as 'immigrant politics' - "the political activities that migrants or refugees undertake to better their situation in the receiving country". According to her, these activities can be considered transnational when they also involve the country of origin. This could apply for instance to bilateral accords to regulate migration flows, such as the ones that exist between Colombia and Spain, or to the recent agreement on social security payments between the two countries. Moras Mena (2005), in her study on Uruguayan migrants in Spain, also argues that these organisations can be studied from a transnational point of view, since not only do they seek to facilitate the integration of migrants in their new country, but they can also act as a source of information on the community and the migratory process in the home country, and as a vehicle to demand political rights in the home country and legal ones in the country of settlement. In the case of some of the groups I came in contact with in Madrid, I found out that although their primary focus was to serve the needs of the local community, their activities and interests went far beyond this. Aculco (Asociación Cultural Colombiana – Colombian Cultural Association), which is probably one of the oldest ones and has offices both in Spain and the United Kingdom, specifies in its website that one of its aims is to boost the political participation of foreign communities in Spain and England, as well as the participation of Latin American migrants in their countries of origin.

### ***Electoral politics and wider political activities from abroad***

The seminar on the international migration of Colombians and the formation of transnational communities organised in 2003 by the Colombian foreign ministry included a workshop on transnational political participation. The report on this workshop stated:

The integration of the Colombian community abroad in the development of the country and the defence of its interests make them part of the agenda of the country. The links that our compatriots maintain with their country of origin must be strengthened through the development of the mechanisms for political participation included in the 1991 Constitution (Colombia Nos Une, 2003, p.143).<sup>(17)</sup>

According to Hazán (2001), Colombia has been developing an integrated policy towards its

population abroad since the beginning of the 1990s, which includes the granting of dual citizenship by the 1991 constitution, the right to vote in elections in Colombia (since 1961), and the creation of the 'circunscripción especial'<sup>(18)</sup> for Colombians abroad. This contrasts, for instance, with lesser efforts on the part of Mexico to incorporate politically its citizens abroad, despite its greater migratory tradition. The 2006 elections in Colombia was the second time that Colombians abroad voted for the circunscripción especial. In Spain, I interviewed three men who were standing as candidates to represent Colombians abroad. Two of them had been candidates in the previous elections as well, and had experience of campaigning, not only in Spain, but also in New York, Los Angeles and Miami, as well as in Venezuela and Mexico. Their proposed electoral programmes focused on improving the political, economic, social and cultural rights of Colombians abroad, but they tackled also wider issues to do with the international relations of Colombia and the armed conflict.

This emerging transnational political field is also reflected in the growing interest of the Colombian political parties on their compatriots abroad. Hazán (2001) points out that the Liberal Party now allows Colombians abroad to be official party delegates. An interesting case is that of the Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), whose base of supporters in Europe played a significant role in the 2006 elections, as I witnessed during one of their meetings in Spain. During three days, representatives and supporters of the PDA and 'friends' of the left met outside Barcelona to boost the process of unity of the democratic left in Colombia, and to discuss their electoral strategy. This was their second meeting at European level, and some 60 people assisted from different cities in Spain and five other countries. One of the organisers of the meeting explained it in this way:

I am also a member of a political party there [in Colombia], the Polo Democrático ... I represent the party in this region ... we are now preparing a meeting ... to see how we are going to organise our work for the upcoming elections, both for parliament and the presidency ... the Polo is a very new movement, it was created about a year and a half ago, almost two years ago ... Being a new party, because it is such a new party, it has to think that in a country like Colombia, where 10% of the population, some 4 million people out of a total population of 40 million, live abroad ... in theory that would mean some 2 million voters, then from a political point of view, for the election campaign, it is very important that these people have a voice (interview conducted on 16 June 2005 in Barcelona).

According to data from the Colombian embassy in Madrid, for the 28 May presidential election this year, they achieved twice the rate of participation compared with the 2002 elections, and three times the rate of the March 2006 legislative poll. As figures from the 'registraduría' show, the rate of participation in the presidential election for Colombians abroad was lower than that at the national level. Colombians voted from 52 different countries, but looking at the data for those

countries with the largest communities, participation was amongst the lowest both in Spain and the UK (see Table 2). This was partly expected. According to the embassy official I interviewed in Madrid, this is due to general electoral apathy, which tends to be even wider within the electorate abroad, at least in the case of Spain since this is a very recent migrant community and as such its main concerns at the moment are to do with personal survival. He claimed that since most of the Colombians who had migrated to Spain had done so to improve their socio-economic standing, their main preoccupation was economic prosperity, rather than politics at home. The Colombian consul in London also mentioned migrants' lack of time to be involved in anything but hard work to earn enough money to survive and send remittances.<sup>(19)</sup>

*Table 2: Rates of participation in the May 2006 presidential election in Colombia and abroad.*

	Spain	UK	France	Italy	US	Canada	Venezuela	Ecuador	Total abroad	National total
Potential votes	39193	5632	3935	2563	126959	7268	81298	13575	319045	26731700
Total votes (%)	28.74	29.94	43.96	32.81	48.05	47.44	23.29	37.27	37.82	45.11

Source: Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, República de Colombia (2006).

However, transnational political activities embrace more than just electoral and party politics. In his article on Mexicans in the United States, Martínez Saldaña (2003) mentions other types of political work, such as for instance protests in front of the consulates at times of high political tension (like in 1994 when the Zapatista rebellion erupted). These types of political activities are also spread throughout the Colombian diaspora, which is no surprise given the situation of polarisation and conflict in the home country. In situations of armed conflict, civil society can and often plays an important role, both at the national and international levels. As Fisas (2004, p.199) argues:

many peace processes owe their existence to the effort and tenacity of all types of people, groups, associations and networks, who despite sometimes lacking in visibility and recognition, still they have undertaken key initiatives, whether it is creating bridges for communication, facilitating relations, putting pressure on armed groups and governments, promoting political debate as an alternative to armed fighting, etc. <sup>(20)</sup>

A lot of work has been done about the role that civil society can play in situations of armed conflict, conflict resolution and post-conflict, not least in the case of Colombia (see Herbolzheimer

Flamtermesky, 2004; and the UNDP, 2003). However, few studies have included diasporas or transnational communities as part of civil society in these contexts (some exceptions are Black et.al, (1998-2000); Zunzer, 2004 ). Zunzer's (2004) work on Sri Lankans and other exiled nationalities in Europe, where he argues that diaspora communities can have a very effective positive input in civil conflict transformation if they are organised and have the right conditions, both in their country(ies) of settlement and in the homeland. He gives several reasons for this: their more neutral position gained by living far away from the conflict; the expertise and experience they obtain by being educated and living in another society; and their potential for lobbying the international community, as well as for offering support, legitimacy, protection and resources to those working for the same ends in the home country. I would also add the fact that many of those who leave the society in conflict are highly educated and held important positions in government and the private sector, or had ample experience of social and community work, and thus represent a key resource in human capital for the country of origin.

Given the growing size of the Colombian diaspora, the economic relevance of its remittances and evidence of their transnational political practices, it follows on that they could have a role to play in the transformation of conflict at home. During my research I have found ample evidence of the work and lobbying that organisations of Colombians, or individuals, abroad carry out on human rights and peace, at the local, national (including the United Kingdom and Spain), international and transnational levels. Some examples of the organisations they work through are: Colombia Support Network and Colombia Human Rights Network (US-based); Colombia Solidarity Campaign and Colombia Peace Association (UK-based); and Comadheco (Comité Madrileño de Derechos Humanos por Colombia) (based in Spain). Most of these organisations work together with nationals of the countries where they operate, and can act sometimes as support networks for those arriving new in the country:

this is an organisation to promote solidarity with Colombia, to denounce human rights violations, and its members are both Colombians and Spaniards ... its work is mainly to make public opinion sensitive to what is happening in Colombia with regard to the armed conflict. But we also have a centre to help those Colombians who come to claim asylum but have no access to, or any economic means to live somewhere else (interview with Colombian woman member of Comadheco on 7 September 2005 in Madrid)

Another example is a group I contacted in Barcelona, the Colectivo Maloka, which was created by Colombians and locals. In its website, the group demands a negotiated political solution to the armed conflict, and explains how they support social movements in Colombia through the formation of international networks. As two of their members explained to me, they also work



organising workshops to increase awareness of the Colombian situation amongst both locals and migrants. UK-based organisations such as the ones mentioned above, or the refugee group Coras, organise similar events. For instance, Justice for Colombia, describes itself in its website as “a coalition of British organisations working in support of the Colombian people and trade union movement in their campaign for basic human rights and their struggle for peace with social justice” (Justice for Colombia/about JFC). Although this organisation is British, they also have Colombians working with them. Their main activities are to fund projects in Colombia, organise delegations of English trade unionists, politicians, lawyers, and journalists to visit Colombia, lobby UK politicians and raise awareness of the Colombian situation within the British public. Although all these activities at the European level can be small in terms of the people involved, and their visibility, compared to what goes on in the United States, they are still important given European involvement in the conflict in Colombia and the search for peace.<sup>(21)</sup>

### ***Colombians following (or not) the political situation at home***

For some exiled Colombians, like Aristizabal (2005, p.1), the diaspora, which includes refugees, exiles, professionals and workers:

has a political role to play in the Colombian context, both for personal reasons, if people wish to return to Colombia with dignity and conditions of security, but also because of the crisis in the country. The diaspora can and must make a commitment with peace and reconstruction. Its role can be summarised in two tasks: the creation of a Colombian community abroad, and to help Colombia to understand the realities and current trends in today's globalised world. <sup>(22)</sup>

However, awareness of this within the diaspora depends a lot on personal circumstances. The number of people that participate in, or follow the political situation back in Colombia is generally low. Involvement tends to be more frequent among those who had a history of political activism in Colombia and had to leave the country for political reasons. As I experienced during my research with Colombian refugees in London, for these people who had to leave Colombia because of their political work and ideals, continuing with this type of commitments is very important (Bermúdez Torres, 2003). As the man from the PDA that I interviewed in Barcelona explained:

for someone like me, who was sort of a leader of social movements in Colombia, to be here, in exile, is very hard, since you are not only far away from your country and your family, but also from the activities that you used to do ... but in my case it is not like this, since I am still active, participating, working, creating projects and proposing new ones, organising meetings...

Even within this group of migrants, not all are equally involved, although most at least follow political events in Colombia through the internet and talking to friends and family. On the one hand, for those who arrived in the country of settlement recently, their main preoccupation tends to be daily survival. As the woman working for Comadheco explained:

this is also a process, first you have to find your own place, financially, in the work place, professionally, and after that, when you have more time and are ready to do other things, then you can do other things (interview conducted on 7 September 2005 in Madrid).

Another Colombian woman I spoke with in Barcelona who had experience of working with Colombian migrants in Spain, agreed with this, pointing out that in the case of Spain it is still a very recent community, where the main preoccupation yet is economic survival and where people are still too angry for having had to leave Colombia to be able to contribute anything positive back. I also talked to a refugee couple living in Madrid who despite his political past, they were adamant that they did not want any more to do with the political situation in Colombia. Their experience had been so traumatic that they were both now totally focused on their new life in Spain. On the other hand, some of the Colombian refugees I interviewed in London in 2003 also mentioned how as the community becomes more settled and established, people lose interest in what they left behind to concentrate on prospering in their new lives.

For those who migrated for other reasons rather than political ones, interest on participating in politics back home is even lower. Most of the 'economic' migrants I interviewed had no political involvement, although the situation was slightly different amongst students. For instance, I spoke with a young woman in Barcelona who had never been involved in politics in Colombia, but developed an interest as a student in the United Kingdom and now worked for an organisation in Spain supporting social movements in Colombia. I also spoke with a student in Madrid and another one in London who had maintained their political militancy while abroad and were involved in supporting their party during the past elections. Nevertheless, even for those who were not involved, some people still believed that if basic needs were sorted and Colombians could be more united and organised, they could potentially play a very important role in the political situation at home. There are some impediments to this though. According to the Colombian director of a migrants' NGO I interviewed in Madrid, these are mainly lack of interest on the part of the Colombian government and political class, and the political apathy of the migrants themselves. This opinion was also echoed by the Colombian leader of a Latin American political organisation created recently in London:

if you work with Colombians here, and are persistent, there are possibilities ... but in general Colombians, like myself, are disappointed and have lost interest in Colombian politics (interview conducted on 15 February 2006 in London).

Many of my interviewees also mentioned the problem of ideological and other differences within Colombians abroad, which is a reflection of the divisions at home. In the case of diasporas coming from societies in conflict, obviously when organising abroad they tend to reproduce the divisions affecting them in the home country. Nevertheless, Zunzer (2004) in his study of diaspora communities' positive potential roles for civil conflict transformation in the home country, while acknowledging the ethnic, political and other cleavages affecting these groups, also points out how they can become more 'neutral' through their physical distance from the conflict. This is something that some of my politically-involved Colombian informants in Spain agreed with. They said that some of the divisions affecting Colombians at home, especially those based on class, but also sometimes ideological ones, tend to become more diluted amongst Colombians abroad. In the case of the community in the United Kingdom divisions seemed to be more entrenched, at least within refugee-based groups. According to a British informant with experience of working with the community, this could be the result of the lack of new arrivals as claiming asylum in Britain has become more difficult, which helps entrench old positions and prevents debates from reflecting new realities (interview conducted 6 September 2006).

## Conclusions

Interest in the study of Latin American migration, and the formation of transnational communities and their practices, is relatively recent. In the case of Colombia, the massive exodus of its citizens abroad is also a recent phenomenon, despite the economic and political problems affecting the country, and as such is still understudied. However, slowly the authorities in Colombia and experts are beginning to recognise the relevance and importance of the growing Colombian diaspora, not only in terms of economic remittances but also in political and cultural terms. This is evidenced, for instance, by the granting by the Colombian government of increasing rights to Colombians abroad, or by state- and private-led initiatives to boost linkages between migrants and the home country, as well as between different communities abroad. In this paper, I have focused on Colombian migration to Europe, a less studied phenomenon than that of flows to the United States, and more particularly on the communities in Spain and the UK. Following preliminary analysis of the fieldwork I have carried out in both countries, I have sought to show that there is ample evidence of political transnational activities within these groups, despite the emphasis by earlier studies on Colombians in the United States on the polarisation and fragmentation affecting this group and how this impeded the formation of transnational communities.

Divisions within migrant populations abroad are common, and in the case of Colombians these are exacerbated by the internal armed conflict in Colombia. Nevertheless, given the important role that civil society groups can have in such contexts of conflict, this does not mean that diaspora communities do not have a role to play in the home country. The 2003 seminar organised by the Colombian government on migration and the formation of transnational communities recognised the profound effects that these could have on “the economic development of the country, the relationship between the State and civil society, and perhaps more importantly, in the search, and possible success of a solution to the prolonged conflict affecting the country” (Guarnizo, 2003, p.26; highlighted by myself). It is undeniable that with the rapid growth of the Colombian diaspora, and with migrant remittances rapidly becoming a key source of foreign exchange for the country, these people represent an important potential for their country. The examples of transnational political activities that I have found in the United Kingdom and Spain, although small and dispersed, are already a significant part of such efforts to achieve peace in Colombia, and as such merit further exploration and attention.

## Notes

(1) This is a revised version of a paper presented by the author at the 52nd International Congress of Americanists, July 17-21, 2006, Seville (Spain), based on a PhD research project I am conducting at Queen Mary College, University of London.

(2) Colombia has one of the longest histories of civilian democratic rule and stable economic growth in Latin America. At the same time, the country is associated with high levels of political and other types of violence, as well as repeated peace processes. In addition, since the 1990s the economy has been declining, and unemployment rising. For more background information and literature on Colombia see (Bermúdez Torres, 2003).

(3) I use the term 'diaspora' in its wider sense to describe: "displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile...[to] one or more nation-states, territories, or countries" (Brazier and Mannur, 2003, p.1).

(4) My own translation from Spanish. Italics in the original.

(5) The 4-5 million figure is quoted in the website of 'Conexion Colombia'. Other sources believe that this figure could be as high as 8 million (personal discussion held with experts in Montmeló, Spain, October, 2005).

(6) The article by the Colombian magazine *Semana* argues that there are some 500,000 Colombians living 'legally' in the US, but including those living in an 'illegal' situation the final figure could be over 2 million.

(7) The shift in migration flows could have been partly due to the increased entry restrictions in the UK.

(8) This study was commissioned by the Colombian consulate in London to an independent organisation called Open Channels. According to this study, the figures for the size of the Colombian community are based on data from the 1991 UK census, the Labour Force Survey, and the Home Office, as well as numbers given by the consulate, and information from community organisations and members.

(9) Figures from the UK census, taken from the website of the BBC Born Abroad Project ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/born\\_abroad/countries/html/south\\_america.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/born_abroad/countries/html/south_america.stm)) [checked 27 September 2006].

(10) This section is based on the preliminary results of the fieldwork I am conducting in Spain (Madrid-Barcelona) in May-December 2005, and the UK (London) in February 2006-present (and in 2003), based mainly on one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation.

(11) For more on debates and research on transnational migration see, for instance: Al-Ali and Koser (2002), Glick Schiller and Levitt (2004), Faist (2000), Guarnizo and Smith (1998), Itzigsohn et al. (1999), and Kennedy and Roudometof (2002).

(12) See also Itzigsohn et al., 1999, for their differentiation between 'narrow' and 'broad', or 'core' and 'expanded', transnationalism; and Al-Ali et al. (2001) differentiate between transnational 'activities' and 'capabilities'.

(13) Social remittances is a term coined by Levitt and refers to the "transferencias de productos materiales e intangibles: víveres y enseres, maquinaria, tecnología, apoyos, ideas, experiencias y conocimientos" (Escrivá and Ribas, 2004a, p.37). There is a lot of interest currently about the links between migration and development (see, for instance, Carling, 2005; Escrivá and Ribas 2004b; UN General Assembly, 18 May 2006).

(14) See Murcia Méndez (2003) on the importance of such new technologies for the Colombian diaspora.

(15) My own translation from Spanish.

(16) All quotations from informants have been translated from Spanish by myself.

(17) My own translation from Spanish.

(18) The representative chamber in Colombia allows for the election of five members as part of 'special electoral districts' (two to represent indigenous communities, two for Afro-Colombians, and one for Colombians abroad) (see website of the chamber - [http://www.camararep.gov.co/web/mod.php?mod=userpage&menu=803&page\\_id=24](http://www.camararep.gov.co/web/mod.php?mod=userpage&menu=803&page_id=24) [20 December 2005]).

(19) Conversations held on 10 October 2005 in Madrid, and on 18 May 2006 in London.

(20) My own translation from Spanish.

(21) For more on this see, for instance, CIP-FUHEM, 2003, and the Colombia/Europe project: <http://www.euro-colombia.org/> ). For examples of these activities at US levels, see Pérez Brenan (2003).

(22) My own translation from Spanish.

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Comadheco ([www.comadheco.org](http://www.comadheco.org))

Aculco ([www.aculco.org](http://www.aculco.org))