



World Wide Webs: who governs the diasporas?

by Roderick Parkes and Annelies Pauwels

Global migration patterns have changed over the past two decades. Formerly linear, unidirectional and often permanent, migration has fast become more ‘circular’, pluridirectional and temporary: globalisation favours frequent and intense contact between migrants and their home countries. This has allowed for tighter economic connections between the host-country and homeland, and Western states have come to view diasporas as a useful conduit for channeling wealth, expertise and perhaps even values. For the most part, countries of origin gratefully accept the advantages their expatriates bring – such as remittances, investments, or the transfer of innovative technologies and skills.

More than half of UN members have now adopted diaspora strategies, creating institutions, engaging in outreach or extending rights for citizens abroad. India, for instance, has eased travel rules for overseas citizens and set up a public-private partnership between its Diaspora Ministry and the Confederation of Indian Industry. Such initiatives have in turn spurred many Western states to deepen their engagement with diaspora communities, using them as peacebuilders or democratisation actors but also in other spheres such as intercultural dialogue.

Numerous studies have shown that migrants with strong ties to their homeland become self-aware and confident, leading to better employment prospects. Thus, when states like Turkey and Morocco recently intensified their diaspora outreach efforts, this seemed to complement Western policies: the pair

aimed to empower their diaspora communities, exhorting their expats to benefit from educational opportunities in the West, to learn the language and participate in local politics. But, as diasporas rise, so too does ‘diaspora lobbying’, and now there are fears that governments like Ankara or Rabat may seek to instrumentalise their expatriates.

Are migrant groups manipulated?

Governments can use their overseas nationals to extend their international influence. Turkey, which has been engaged in diaspora politics since at least the 1980s, is trying to increase its hold over the approximately 4 million Turks in Western Europe for just such reasons. The Turkish government apparently aims to further not just the national interest but its own political agenda. The AKP government has vastly expanded overseas voting rights in a bid to shore up its electoral base.

Across the West, support for (functional) integration is usually gladly accepted. Problems arise, however, when the sending-state’s interference conflicts with the interests of the host state. The debate regarding foreign interference recently resurfaced when a Turkish consulate in Europe called upon local Turkish organisations to report Turks who insulted President Erdogan, or when the Turkish state-run press agency Anadolu Ajansi published a list of local schools and organisations which allegedly maintain links to Fethullah Gülen, suspected by the Turkish government of having orchestrated the July coup attempt.

Eritrea is another tricky case. Asmara has long been suspected of extorting taxes from its overseas population. Currently, exiles loyal to Afewerki's repressive regime appear to be attempting, through a series of court cases, to dissuade European newspapers and academics from investigating and reporting about the regime's intimidation of expatriates.

Russia is seemingly trying to increase its influence over its diaspora across Europe, too. In 2015 a number of demonstrations against one EU government fuelled suspicions that the Kremlin is intentionally mobilising its diaspora to bolster division in host countries. EU governments are also concerned that a handful of Russian asylum-seekers, mixed in among a recent influx of Chechen refugees, may act as trolls, sowing dissent. Following Russian actions in Ukraine, and before that in Georgia, Moscow is suspected of portraying its diaspora as vulnerable in order to justify overseas actions in its defence.

Are states losing grip?

In reality, however, diaspora groups can seldom be instrumentalised in this way. They undertake their own independent advocacy activities. Canada, under the previous Harper government, provides an illuminating example: 1.2 million Canadian-Ukrainians lobbied for and managed to obtain Canadian arms and loans for Ukraine after Russia's incursions there.

Some diaspora organisations are flatly hostile to their home country's government. Turks in Europe are a fragmented community, and include Kurds and other minorities hostile to the current government in Ankara. A 2013 protest organised by a diaspora organisation close to the AKP, and aimed at supporting the government during the Gezi Park protests, had a relatively poor turnout. In frustration at such setbacks, President Erdogan alleged that Turkish-German parliamentarians have 'impure blood' since they had voted for the recognition of the Armenian genocide in June 2016.

The Iranian regime too is finding it difficult to establish links with its diverse (and mainly liberal) diaspora: many Iranians fled the country for political reasons, whether after the Islamic Revolution, during the war with Iraq, or after conservative president Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009. Although this diaspora has occasionally entered into a series of brief rapprochements with Teheran, they may be pursuing their own agenda – such as investment opportunities in post-war reconstruction or under the international sanctions regime.

Diasporas are not always a force for liberalism. Certainly, Ethiopia's 2008 diaspora bond project – an

initiative to attract investments from Ethiopian émigrés to develop a state-owned hydro-electric power project – failed to raise enough money due in large part to reluctance to finance the authoritarian regime. Yet, emigrants often adopt hardline – more nationalist or conservative – views with regard to their country of origin. Armenian-American lobbying repeatedly exerted influence on US foreign policy, allegedly stalling Armenia's reconciliation processes with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Play or be played?

Europeans have only just got used to the idea that diasporas' engagement in their home countries is a potentially useful asset rather than a sign of split loyalties – whether it be Egyptian diaspora groups supporting their country's struggle for democracy, or Somali women pushing for greater gender equality at home. Yet now Europeans fear seeing their societies split by dissent and conflicts imported from outside. They fear Saudi Arabia's funding of Wahhabi mosques, or lobbying by South Asian diasporas to take sides in polarised geopolitical debates, or the growth of foreign fighters and of Kurdish-Turkish and Sunni-Shiite tensions.

Yet European societies rank as cohesive and stable. Their governments have the means to manage integration problems. The situation only really becomes problematic, however, when they are bargaining with other states over issues such as migration. In the course of the migration crisis, it has become clear that some governments actively fear their overseas diasporas. Ethiopia and Mali are reluctant to take back irregular migrants from the EU, for fear that they will foment political dissent. One South Asian country has reportedly lost track of citizens who have been given passports by its consulates, and now frets about who might be expelled from Europe.

The risk for European governments is clear: they are coming under pressure to help authoritarian regimes increase control of their diasporas. Major sending countries stipulate which of their citizens should be returned from Europe, and which not. They are making demands about which of their citizens may move to Europe, and which not. Thus, when these states demand that the EU create 'legal migration opportunities' for their citizens, they are not talking about classic 'mobility partnerships'. What they really want are benefits for a small number of people with unquestioned loyalty to the government and official passports.

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