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Bermudez, Anastasia

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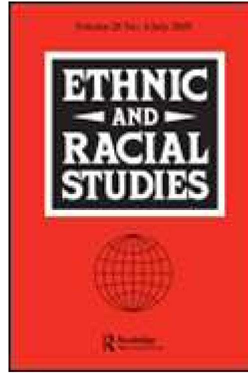


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# Transnational Political Practices of Colombians in Spain and the United Kingdom: Politics 'Here' and 'There



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# The Transnational Political Practices of Colombians in Spain and the United Kingdom: Politics 'Here' and 'There'


## Abstract

Most existing scholarly work available on Colombian migrants' transnational political practices has emphasised the divisions, mistrust and apathy affecting them. However, research conducted by the author among Colombians in the United Kingdom and Spain departs from previous studies by stressing the broad nature of migrants' transnational political participation, which involves engagement in both formal and informal politics, at the individual and collective levels, and in initiatives coming from 'above' and 'below'. It also shows how transnational political practices oriented towards the home country occur simultaneously with activities in the host society, contrary to what has generally been thought. This was more the case among Colombians in Spain than those in the United Kingdom, which could be partly explained by differences in the historical development and size of each community, as well as the role played by individual factors, such as migrants' previous political experiences.


**Keywords**: transnational migration, political participation, Latin America, Spain, United Kingdom, Colombia

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## Introduction

The issue of migrants' political participation in host societies (mainly in the Global North) has received renewed attention, linked to the debates on migration and security

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and the meaning of concepts such as nation-state and citizenship. This has been discussed mainly within the framework of the political opportunity structure developed for the study of social movements and later applied to migrants' mobilisation (*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2004, 2005; Peró 2007). At the same time, new transnational approaches to the study of international migration have moved away from the traditional focus on incorporation and acculturation towards the recognition that migrants 'do not delink themselves from their home country; instead, they keep and nourish their linkages to their place of origin' (Itzigsohn et al. 1999, p. 317). Initially, studies of transnational migration focused on economic exchanges, but as research has expanded, there has been growing recognition that 'transnational social fields' also encompass political and symbolic links (*ibid*).

While the study of migrant political transnationalism has developed mainly out of research on Latinos in the United States, the issue of political participation in the host society has been discussed mostly in reference to long-established ethnic minority groups, both in the United States and Europe. In the European context, there is an ongoing public debate about migrants' political rights, especially in relation to voting (see Bauböck 2006). More recently, there has also been growing interest in the integration of new migrant groups, including Latin Americans. This article looks at the little explored subject of Colombian migration to Spain and the United Kingdom, focusing on migrants' political engagement. It first outlines the theoretical and methodological approach to the research conducted, as well as the characteristics of the communities studied. The second section focuses on the connections between involvement in 'home' and 'host' politics, seeking to compare similarities and differences across geographical locations, as well as highlighting the impact of individual factors.

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## Transnational migration and political participation

The transnational approach to migration focuses on how migrants 'forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Banc 1994, p. 5). This new way of looking at international migration did not emerge strongly until the second half of the nineties, mainly in the context of Latin American and Caribbean labour migration to the United States. Work later expanded to cover other migrations to this country, as well as other types of migration and different world regions. The transnational focus on migration in the European context is relatively recent (see Rogers 2000; Grillo 2001; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003).[1]

Since then, there have been numerous studies looking at the conformation of 'transnational fields of action' or 'transnational social fields' (see, for instance, Faist 2000). These are defined as fields 'of social interactions and exchanges that transcend political and geographical boundaries' (Itzigsohn et al. 1999, p.317). Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen (2004) find this concept useful for two reasons: it links migrants with those who stay behind; and goes beyond the binary opposition between migrant incorporation (or integration) and transnationalism. Initially, the focus was mainly on economic and individual social exchanges, and especially on the importance of economic remittances, with interest on the political aspects developing later. Studies on the transnational political activities of migrants have been approached from various perspectives. Some have looked at the levels and types of political participation of migrants oriented towards the home country, especially focusing on Latinos in the US (see Guarnizo,

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Portes and Haller 2003). Less has been done from the meso level with respect to immigrant organisations (see Landolt and Goldring 2006; Portes, Escobar and Arana 2008). More recently, there has also been an emphasis on the state level, looking at the political rights that nations afford their nationals abroad and the creation of programmes to strengthen links with the diaspora (see Gamlen 2006 for an overview of this).

However, few studies have considered the connections between migrants' transnational political practices and their integration in the host societies. Jones-Correa (1998), in his research with Latinos in New York, argued that their low levels of naturalisation and participation in formal politics in the US were the result not only of political marginalisation, but also of their situation in a 'politics of in-between' based on the 'myth of return'. However, for Portes and Rumbaut (2006, p. 138, emphasis in original) when transnational political participation in the country of origin is measured against political loyalties in the country of settlement, there is not 'a zero-sum game', but rather 'many aspects of transnationalism end up *accelerating* the political integration of immigrants in the United States'. This conclusion was later reinforced in another study by Portes, Escobar and Arana (2008, p. 1085) of Latin American transnational and ethnic organisations in the United States, where they concluded that '[t]ransnationalism and political incorporation proceed simultaneously'.

Bearing these issues in mind, the present article seeks to contribute to the emerging transatlantic debate on migrant political mobilisation from a transnational approach in the less studied European context (see Martiniello and Lafleur 2008). It argues that migrant transnationalism and integration can be mutually reinforcing processes, and should be seen as part of a continuum rather than as separate issues as



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has been thought of until now. This finding is based on PhD research conducted by the author on the transnational political connections of Colombian migrants in Spain (Madrid/Barcelona) and the United Kingdom (London) during 2004-2007. The study was qualitative, involving semi-structured interviews, participant observation and content analysis of websites and other materials. In total, 96 people (49 in Spain and 47 in the UK) were interviewed, mostly Colombian migrants, but also some key experts and officials. Since the aim was not to find a representative sample, the selection of participants was driven by the characteristics of the research and involved mainly Colombian migrants with some level of involvement in transnational politics. Interviewees included refugees, labour migrants, professionals and students, as well as people who had migrated for other reasons. Finally, the conceptual framework used a wide definition of political activities, whether individual or collective, both formal and informal.2

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## Colombian migration abroad

Colombia has a long history of internal and external migrations, both forced and voluntary. However, the phenomenon of substantial Colombian migration abroad is very recent. Emigration rates started to climb up in the sixties and rapidly accelerated throughout the nineties and into the twenty first century, as levels of violence and insecurity in Colombia increased and economic conditions deteriorated. According to current estimates, there are more than four million Colombians living abroad (or around one in ten of the national population) (Colombia Nos Une 2008). Although it is assumed that most Colombians migrate abroad for economic reasons, refugees have also contributed to these flows.

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Traditionally, migration in Colombia has tended to be internal, across borders (mainly to Venezuela) and to the United States. However, from the nineties, destinations have also diversified, both within the region and in other directions. Europe was initially only a destination for the Colombian elite, political refugees, intellectuals and others. However, in the seventies, as the UK government authorised the entry of non-skilled migrants to work in services, between 4,000-10,000 Colombians arrived as temporary workers. From the end of the eighties-beginning of the nineties, a third and more important wave of emigration towards Europe (mainly Spain) started, as part of wider Latin American flows (*Semana* 30/11/03). Spain and the United Kingdom currently account for the first and second largest Colombian communities in Europe respectively.[3]

Colombians in the UK: a largely invisible community

Latin Americans are currently one of the fastest-growing migrant groups in the United Kingdom, but this is still a recent and small community, and thus hardly visible (see McIlwaine 2007; Peró 2007). According to Guarnizo (2006b), England, and London in particular, had always occupied a special place for the Colombian upper classes, attracting political leaders, young professionals and students. These linkages were later widened to include all sectors of the Colombian population, especially from the seventies. Today, estimates of the total number of Colombians in the United Kingdom range from 50,000 to 150,000 (Guarnizo 2006b). A recent study (Open Channels 2000) divides Colombian migration to the country into roughly three stages: 1975-1979, when many came under the work permit system; 1980-1986, during which an increasing



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number of Colombians arrived despite the ending of that system, as migration networks became established; and 1986-1997, which saw an upsurge in the number of asylum-seekers. Although the arrival of Colombian refugees in the United Kingdom dates back to the seventies, numbers increased greatly during the following two decades as violence in the country intensified, declining subsequently as immigration laws became stricter. In addition, there are a significant number of Colombian students and professionals in the country.

Most Colombians, and Latin Americans in general, have settled in or around London, especially in the boroughs of Lambeth, Islington, Southwark and Camden (Open Channels 2000). As the community in London has increased in size, so also has its heterogeneity.[4] The majority of migrants have an urban, working- or middle-class background, coming from Bogotá and other large and medium-size cities in the Valle del Cauca, Eje Cafetero and Antioquia. They also have relatively high levels of formal education. Despite this, most work in low-skilled activities, such as domestic and industrial cleaning, catering or retail. Suggestions are that there are more women than men, with the female ratio being 53.5%-58.7%. The majority of Colombians in London are twenty-fifty years old and in the productive age bracket. The studies available suggest that most Colombians migrate to the United Kingdom for socio-economic reasons, with a small minority escaping political violence. However, other research has highlighted the connections between the different types of migration, and the relevance of violence and insecurity as explanatory factors (McIlwaine 2005).

The larger, more recent Colombian community in Spain



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In the last two decades, Spain has gone from being a country of emigration to one of immigration. The composition of migration flows to Spain has also changed, from being mainly Western European to a majority of migrants now coming from Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Traditionally, Colombian migration to Spain was mostly by refugees, intellectuals and students. However, throughout the eighties, and especially since the late nineties, the community has grown in size exponentially. Official data estimates that there were just under 300,000 Colombians living in Spain at the beginning of 2007 (INE 2008), making it among the five largest migrant communities in the country. However, unofficial reports believe that the real figure could be much higher given those migrants in an 'irregular' situation. Available research suggests that they are mostly labour migrants, although violence and security were also important reasons for migrating (IOM/UN 2003). In addition, a significant number of Colombian students and professionals reside in Spain.

Latin American migration to Spain has been highly ‘feminised’, mainly as a result of the demand for women to work in domestic service. However, the data available suggests that the feminisation rate for Colombians (58%) is not as high as that of other nationalities (Pellegrino 2004). Most Colombians in Spain are economically active (nineteen-forty four years old), although the proportion of under sixteens is growing (IOM/UN 2003). On the whole, it seems to be a younger community than the one in London, reflecting its more recent establishment. As in the United Kingdom, Colombian migrants have relatively high levels of education, but tend to work mainly in domestic service, followed by catering, construction and retail (IOM/UN 2003). However, in contrast, the Colombian population in Spain is geographically spread. The largest number by far live in the Madrid region, with a similar amount equally





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distributed between Cataluña (mainly Barcelona) and Valencia (INE 2008). Most Colombian migration to Spain originates from the same regions as UK flows. The IOM/UN study (2003, pp. 176) found a close relationship between area of origin within Colombia and specific destinations in Spain, which reflected 'the existence and great importance of migratory networks, based on links related to family, community and friendships' (own translation). These networks are key in the decision to migrate, the organisation of the trip and the settlement of migrants, but are also evident in the links maintained with the home country, not only at the personal and economic level (remittances), but also politically.

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## The political experiences of Colombian migrants in Spain and the UK

The work available on US-based Colombian migrants' transnational political practices has emphasised the divisions, mistrust, lack of involvement and apolitical nature of these (Guarnizo and Díaz 1999; Guarnizo, Sánchez and Roach 1999; Guarnizo, Portes and Haller 2003). However, my research with Colombians in the UK and Spain, using a broad definition of what constitutes transnational politics, found widespread evidence of engagement by migrants, calling into question previous findings. Most of the Colombian migrants interviewed had some level of transnational political participation, whether as individuals or as part of a group (or both).[5] There was participation in both formal and informal politics, at the individual and collective levels, and in initiatives coming from 'above' and 'below' (see Smith and Guarnizo 1998). In many cases, transnational political engagement with the home country coexisted with participation in the politics of the host society, although not always at similar levels or at the same time.

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Individual participation in formal politics at both ends

At the individual level, migrant engagement was mostly in formal politics, through voting or active involvement in party politics (as a candidate, party member, participating in meetings and election campaigns). Although the main focus of the research conducted was on home country politics, at least six Colombians interviewed (2 men and 2 women in Spain, 3 women in the United Kingdom) also talked about their engagement in the politics of the host country.

Colombians abroad enjoy wide political rights vis-a-vis their country of origin, including the right to double citizenship under the 1991 constitution, as well as to vote in presidential and congressional elections and be elected as a representative of the diaspora.[6] In addition, Colombians in Spain, despite being a recent migrant group, enjoy special facilities to acquire Spanish nationality,[7] a precondition for participating formally in host country politics.[8] This allowed some Colombian respondents to vote both in their country of origin and in the host society. For some, like Andrew, a refugee who arrived in Madrid in 1999, exercising the right to vote in both places was very important. He had always voted in the Colombian elections, even from Spain, and had found a way to vote in Spain even before acquiring Spanish nationality:[9]

> I have Spanish citizenship. During the last elections I was already Spanish, but had not received my identity card yet, which meant that I could not vote. But my boyfriend (...) was not interested in voting, so I asked him to vote for me. On other occasions, friends have also voted for me. I find it





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> incredible that people do not vote if they can (...) Since they were not voting, I asked them to do it for me and told them who to vote for.

Andrew had been a journalist in Colombia and had always 'liked politics a lot'. Prior political experiences also helped shape migrants' levels and types of political engagement in London. For Colombians in the United Kingdom, obtaining British nationality can take more time.[10] Nevertheless, according to Home Office (2008) data, 1,845 Colombians were granted British citizenship in 2007, the largest category in the Americas after the United States and Jamaica. Three Colombian women interviewed in London talked about their involvement in British politics. Two of them had migrated in the eighties, the other in 1999, which means they were among the earliest arrivals. In two cases, voting in UK elections was explained in relation to electoral participation in Colombia. One woman explained that although she had never voted while living in Colombia (she was in her early twenties at the time of migration) she had recently started to vote in her country of origin prompted by her brother in Colombia, who was actively involved in party politics. This had increased her interest in participating electorally in the United Kingdom, and following her acquisition of British nationality she had started to do so. By contrast, Julieta, who also had double nationality, explained that she had never voted in Colombia or the United Kingdom, since she was 'not inclined towards one side [political ideology/option] or another'. In her case, voting was identified with party politics, something she disliked and did not want to become involved in.

Guarnizo (2006b), in his study of Colombians in London, also found a strong correlation between electoral participation in both polities, with differences in the levels

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and types of engagement. Among respondents in my study, this extended to more active forms of involvement. Two women and one man in Spain, all refugees, and a woman in the UK participated in party politics in both countries. For Elena, who had a personal and family history of Left-wing activism before arriving in Spain in 2000, maintaining her political activism had not been easy. Like many other migrants, her main preoccupation had been sustaining herself and her family. However, she had managed to keep up some level of involvement in Colombian politics, going to meetings, giving talks and attending electoral events organised in Madrid. But this was not enough for her so she had started to contact some Spanish parties closer to her ideological position. She also justified this saying that she now had a daughter born in Spain, whom she wanted to learn about the political history of both her country of birth and that of her parents. Luis, on the other hand, participated in the 2006 Colombian elections, actively mobilising in support of a new Left-wing movement, while at the same time helping to organise a new Spanish party for immigrants: 'a party operating within the Spanish state that is born out of the real need to make true the civic and political rights of migrants and that aims to support other citizens' demands, creating new forms of citizen participation' (party leaflet).

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This 'double militancy' was helping Latin American migrants, both in the UK but especially in Spain, to slowly gain in political visibility. Yolanda Villavicencio, a Colombian woman, was elected to the Madrid assembly in the 2007 local elections, the first migrant of Latin American origin to occupy such a post. Since arriving in Spain in the eighties, Yolanda had continued her political activism, first working around issues of human rights and peace in Colombia and later defending the needs and rights of migrants in the host society. She had become coordinator of Aesco (*América, España,*

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*Solidaridad y Cooperación* / America, Spain, Solidarity and Cooperation), one of the largest migrant organisations in Spain, and as well as fulfilling her responsibilities as a Socialist deputy in the Madrid legislature, Yolanda remained actively involved in Colombian politics. The story of Gloria Gómez, in London, is similar. She arrived in the United Kingdom in the eighties and had a history of community involvement in London, as well as being a member of a Colombian political party, and had been very active in campaigning for Colombian elections from London. However, in her case it was disillusionment with Colombian politics, and not only her desire to improve conditions within her community, that led her to create the Latin Front and run for election in the borough of Lambeth (she was not elected):

> This year I am not campaigning because I am totally disillusioned, after seeing the behaviour of the Colombian government towards Colombians abroad. I am not interested in Colombian politicians contacting me during election time, or when they need to count remittances ... I am more interested in helping Colombians locally, and see how they can get on their own feet and think by themselves (...) these are my political interests at the moment.

These cases show that migrants can simultaneously engage in the politics of both their home and host countries. Previous political experience seems to be key when explaining migrant political engagement. It is mainly those Colombians with a prior history of interest and active participation in politics who sought to maintain their political engagement 'here' and/or 'there'. They were also long-term migrants, mostly refugees, and both men and women. For many of these refugees, continuing their

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political activism after migration was not only a matter of personal fulfillment, but also a way to survive the experience of exile (see Bermúdez Torres 2003). Longer-term residents, on the other hand, tend to have a more stable socio-economic position, as well as the legal conditions, to participate more fully in the politics of the host society (at least formally). Finally, the type and level of transnational and domestic political involvement varied depending on context, with some migrants maintaining a double militancy while others participated in one country or another in different ways and with different intensity at different times. Nevertheless, the connections between transnational and domestic politics were stronger in the case of Colombians in Spain than in the UK, partly a reflection of historical ties as well as the size and characteristics of the communities studied as further explored below.

Collective political mobilisation: the role of migrant organisations

Colombians in Spain and the UK have also been a key force behind the organisation and collective activity of the wider Latin American migrant communities. This can probably be explained by their numerical weight, as well as their high levels of human capital and political experience. Two of the main Latin American migrant organisations in Madrid, Aesco (see above) and Aculco (*Asociación Socio-Cultural y de Cooperación al Desarrollo por Colombia e Iberoamérica* - Socio-Cultural and Cooperation Development Association for Colombia and Latin America) were led by Colombians (a woman and a man). Both were founded, with some Spanish participation, in the early nineties with a very transnational approach, although with a different focus. Aesco started as an example of what Østergaard (2003) calls 'diaspora' politics:[11]

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> This organisation was founded by people who arrived here in the eighties (...) Colombians in search of asylum (...) They wanted to become involved from here, to support the human rights struggle and the incipient civil society movement for peace that started to emerge then (...) But later this became frustrated, because the FARC, the main guerrilla force, did not hand in their weapons, and negotiations with the government were broken (Aesco coordinator, Madrid).

Aculco, on the other hand, started as an attempt to promote Colombian culture abroad and counter the negative image of the country. However, as migration to Spain started to accelerate, both organisations began to focus more on the local needs of Colombian migrants, and later of the wider Latin American community. Their main activities involved offering labour, legal, social and cultural assistance to migrants. But this did not mean that the focus on the country of origin had disappeared completely; the organisations' original political and cultural aims were still there, even if more subdued. In addition, more recently, both organisations had become involved in the promotion of development and co-development projects in Colombia.[12] At a more political level, Aesco and Aculco had also in recent years undertaken initiatives aimed at increasing the political participation of migrants both at the local level (in the host society) and in the country of origin. As well as promoting the need to vote in Colombian elections among migrants, both organisations were participating in the *mesas de diálogo y convivencia* (neighbourhood committees for dialogue and coexistence):

> [this is] a project of the Madrid town hall (...) an innovative process, but



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> we believe that we have to participate, and if this helps enhance citizen participation, then it will be good. We think that participating in this process might give people more opportunities for integration, and for having their voices heard (...) This project is interesting because it allows any person over sixteen to vote [candidates for the *mesas*], with the only requisite that they are registered in their neighbourhood, so they do not have to have legal migrant status or a residence permit (Aesco worker, Madrid).

Thus, while fostering migrant participation more formally in Colombian politics, given the lesser access of migrants to formal politics in the host society, these organisations were promoting more informal ways of mobilisation. As in the individual cases discussed above, this shows that migrant collective political engagement can also combine a transnational and domestic approach, with focus, type and levels of activities varying depending on contextual and other factors. However, this was less evident in the case of the United Kingdom. In general, the strength of Latin American migrant organisations in London was less, and they were more focused on solving the local practical needs of migrants than on more political goals. Although the Colombian community in the United Kingdom is older and heavily concentrated in London, it is much smaller and has not been growing as fast and dynamically in recent years as the one in Spain. In addition, the lack of 'ethnic' status of Latin Americans in the United Kingdom has made this community more invisible and politically marginal than other ethnic groups with a longer history of migration and colonial ties to the country. This contrasts with the 'privileged' position of Latin American migrants in Spain, based on the strong historical links between the two. Also, the legal and institutional environment

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in which these organisations had developed, in one country and another, was different.[13]

Nevertheless, more recently some sectors of the Latin American community in London had been working towards greater politicisation of community activities. Many Latin American migrant organisations in London had their origins in the solidarity and support groups set up by political refugees arriving in the seventies and eighties, mostly from Chile and Argentina, but later also from Colombia. However, as in the case of Spain, as the community grew larger and more diverse, these organisations began to focus more on serving the local needs of migrants. These were the cases, for instance, of Coras (Colombian Refugee Association), Carila (Latin American Welfare Group) and IRMO:

> IRMO used to be called *Chile Democrático* [Democratic Chile], but following the downfall of Pinochet a lot of Chileans returned to their country and the Chilean community was reduced to a small minority (...) then, those who were in charge decided to restructure the group, created a new constitution and opened up the organisation (...) which they renamed IRMO, which stands for Indoamerican Refugee Migrant Organisation (...) for the whole Latin American community (IRMO representative).

With time, some of the organisations had focused their attention on specific groups, such as the elderly, the disabled, youth or women. But in general, their main focus of work had become service provision for migrants at the local level, mainly in the legal, social, economic and cultural areas, with issues of political participation being less prominent. Their transnational connections were also weaker, with some exceptions



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(mainly the work done in connection with the defense of human rights in Colombia). Nevertheless, as the Latin American community became more established, issues of long-term integration, including at the political level, were beginning to emerge. Two examples of this were the recent establishment of a Latin American Workers' Association, led by Colombian trade unionists, and the Latin Front (see Peró 2007).

One of the founders of the Latin Front was Gloria, the Colombian woman who had run for local election in London and was also Aculco's representative there (see above). Given her political background, this initiative was from the beginning a more political one, aimed primarily at the legal and political recognition of Latin Americans in the United Kingdom as an 'ethnic' group. The Latin Front campaigned for an amnesty for irregular migrants, greater political rights for the migrant population (including voting), and the automatic granting of British citizenship to all children born in the country (interview with Gloria). As well as lobbying the UK authorities, the Latin Front had sought the cooperation of the countries of origin. More specifically, the Front wanted Latin American countries to become more involved in defending the rights of their citizens abroad and provide alternatives for those who wanted to return. As such, this new political initiative seemed to have been well received by the migrant population, at least initially. According to Gloria, the Front had some 4,000 affiliated members (mostly Colombian), and around twenty people working for it, twelve of them dedicated to the political side, and others focused on social issues. However, in the little time that had been operating, the Latin Front had also raised criticisms and scepticism, with some migrants seeing it mainly as a personal project to gain local political power.

As can be seen from the examples above, transnational and domestic political

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activities at the collective level were stronger in the case of Spain than in the UK, despite recent developments within the London community. These collective political activities were led by those migrants with higher levels and histories of political experience, as explored in the previous section. As in the case of individual participation, the linkages between politics 'here' and 'there' were stronger in the case of some organisations than others, with emphasis towards one place or another varying according to context. In some cases, like that of Aesco or Aculco, this research found, as Portes et al. (2008, p. 1083) did in their study of Latin American migrant organisations in the United States, that 'the distinction between transnational and domestically oriented organizations' can sometimes be 'overstated'.

**Conclusions**

This article has sought to contribute to current debates on migrants and minorities' political mobilisation in the European context, from a transnational approach. That relatively new theoretical approach to the study of international migration allows us to bring to the fore forms of migrant mobilisation previously obscured, and to highlight the connections between transnationalism and integration. In addition, the article focuses attention on a new migrant collective, one that remains understudied despite its growing significance, that of Colombians (and Latin Americans in general) in Europe, and more specifically in Spain and the United Kingdom.

Despite the emphasis by other studies on the lack of political activism among Colombian migrant communities abroad, the study on which this article is based found widespread evidence of migrant political transnationalism among Colombians in the

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two countries, notwithstanding the greater geographical distance, smaller numbers and shorter history of migration of Colombians in Europe compared with their counterparts in the United States.[14] Even more interesting for the purposes of this special issue, the research found evidence of many connections between migrants' political mobilisation oriented towards the home country and activities related to host politics (and between different migrant destinations). The cases analysed here show that these connections happen both at the micro and meso levels. On the one hand, individual migrants participated in the political life of both their countries of origin and destination, mainly through voting and involvement in party politics (formal politics). On the other hand, migrant organisations can also perform a political role vis-a-vis both (and other) polities. These findings support evidence from US-based research indicating that there is no contradiction between sustaining transnational ties and pursuing integration (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes et al. 2008). It is further argued that, rather than seeing participation in home country politics as fostering or impeding political integration of migrants in the host society, both types of political participation should be seen within a continuum.

The level, type and orientation of political participation can vary. The present article has emphasised similarities and differences depending mainly on migrants' country of settlement, previous political experience and specific contexts. Differences in the historical development and size of the Colombian communities in the two countries studied (also versus the United States), as well as in the structural and institutional environments in each destination, are important. They have contributed to greater opportunities for political mobilisation and the development of transnational links among Colombians in Spain. However, personal characteristics, and especially previous



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political experience, emerged also as crucial to explain political engagement. While that might seem obvious it has not always been recognised or acknowledged, migrants often erroneously being assumed to lack any worthwhile experiences prior to their migration (for exceptions see Kosic 2007; Torres 2008).

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ANASTASIA BERMUDEZ is Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London.

ADDRESS: Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK. Email: platypus@telefonica.net

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1 For a review of transnationalism and international migration see Vertovec 2004.

2 I looked at electoral participation, membership of political parties, general interest in political events, participation in state or private initiatives linking the diaspora with the country of origin, as well as the role played by community organisations , the ethnic media, religious institutions and human rights organisations and networks.

3 According to official data , 96 per cent of Colombians living abroad concentrate in ten countries, Venezuela, the United States, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Panama, Mexico and Brazil (Guarnizo 2006a).

4 The information that follows is taken mainly from Guarnizo (2006b) and Open Channels (2000).

5 Although the sample was non-representative and biased towards those who were politically engaged, I also interviewed Colombians with no or very little transnational political participation (7 in Spain, 6

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in the United Kingdom).

6 In addition, Colombia has a bilateral agreement with Spain on dual nationality since 1980. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, recognises dual citizenship.

7 Latin Americans can apply for nationality after two years of continuous residence, compared with five years for refugees and ten years for nationals of other countries. Colombians were the largest group of migrants acquiring Spanish nationality in 2005, with 7,334 (OECD 2007).

8 Spain is currently debating the possibility of granting the right to vote in local elections to migrants from outside the European Union with an specific length of legal residence in the country. However, at the moment, citizens from Colombia cannot vote in Spain or the United Kingdom.

9 All names used are pseudonyms, except in the cases of officials or leaders of organisations.

10 To apply for naturalisation as a British citizen, UK law asks for five years previous residence in the country (or three years if the person is married to a British citizen).

11 Diaspora politics is 'usually about political disputes over sensitive issues such as national sovereignty and security' (*ibid*, p. 762-63).

12 In its website, Aesco states that part of its mission is to “formulate and manage cooperation projects that help improve the quality of life of emigrants and potential emigrants as well as their environment, based on the principles of solidarity, co-development and human rights” (own translation) [http://www.aesco-ong.org/] (20/01/09). See also Aculco's website [http://www.aculco.org/].

13 See Bloemraad (2005) on how states can foster, or presumably impede, the ability of migrants to establish and sustain community organisations.

14 Although this is not always stated, these factors play a significant role when comparing the transnational linkages of Latin American migrants in the United States and Europe, and is evidenced in the lesser institutionalisation of transnational politics in the latter (less active presence of Colombian political parties at election time, less penetration by Colombian diasporic initiatives, etc ...).

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