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### Citation

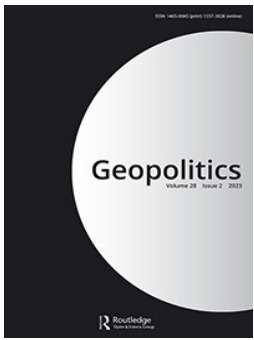
Campos-Delgado, A. (2023). Euphemistic rhetoric and dysphemistic practices: governing migration in Mexico. *Geopolitics*, 29(1), 64-89. doi:10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3638749>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



## Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico

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**To cite this article:** Amalia Campos-Delgado (2023): Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico, *Geopolitics*, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513>



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Published online: 17 Mar 2023.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Mexico's governance of migration and its geopolitical moral dilemma: an enthusiastic champion for migrants' human rights in the international sphere and a tough migration control enforcer. I consider this seemingly ambivalent and contradictory approach through the lens of euphemisms and dysphemisms, more specifically by analysing the use of euphemistic rhetoric and dysphemistic practices in the governance of migration. Through document analysis, I examine Mexico's use of euphemistic rhetoric in its role as migration control enforcer, as well as in its positioning in the relation to the Global Compact on Migration. Drawing on the experiences of irregularised migrants in Mexico and information obtained through Freedom of Information Requests, I analyse three dysphemistic practices in migration management: (i) bureaucratic negligence, (ii) precarious infrastructure, and (iii) spatial fixation and waiting. The Mexican case illustrates the discrepancy between discourse and practice in migration management and is an example of the ambivalences of global migration governance, which instrumentalises euphemistic rhetoric while promoting and tolerating dysphemistic practices.

## Introduction

In a press release on 3 March 2019, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs triumphantly vowed Mexico's adoption to the UN Global Compact for Migration and declared that 'Mexico has stopped deporting hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants' (SRE 2019). While compelling, this is a misleading statement. Mexico has stopped deporting Central American migrants, however, this does not mean that the expulsions have ceased but that the expulsions are now framed as *retorno asistido*, assisted return. The reality is that Mexico's enthusiastic adherence to the Global Compact has not meant that much in practice for the conditions of irregularised migrants in the country; apprehensions, detentions, and expulsions have not ceased, and detention conditions have not been improved, if anything they have worsened (CNDH 2019; Yrizar Barbosa et al. 2022). Mexico's

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actions and discourse on migration law enforcement should be framed, on the one hand, within the control regime implemented since 2001 aiming to intercept and deter migration in transit to the United States (Campos-Delgado 2018); and, on the other, in the desire to avoid international public embarrassment for the weak protection of migrants' human rights and, moreover, in a performative desire to be acknowledged as progressive on these topics. This geopolitical moral struggle is translated into seemingly ambivalent and contradicting discourses and practices. In this paper, I focus on these contradictions and analyse the euphemistic rhetoric and dysphemistic practices in the government of migration in Mexico.

Euphemistic rhetoric is a cornerstone of migration politics, just as much as dysphemistic practices are a cornerstone of migration enforcement. Euphemisms are popular rhetorical tools in migration politics (Ceriani Cernadas 2016). In essence, they are used to elude the moral and ethical condemnation (Allan and Burrige 1991) and 'to mask proscribed conduct or treatment' of policies and practices (Grange 2013, 5). The use of 'assisted return' is perhaps one of the best examples of a migration euphemism, a mild and evasive expression that aims to detach the negative connotations of migration enforcement (Dünnwald 2013). While the rhetoric in migration politics aims to make everything seem polite, or at least less cruel, enforcement practices seek the opposite. The enforcement of migration control is essentially about otherness, hostility, and contempt (De Genova 2013). It involves derogatory and degrading actions towards migrants, aimed at controlling, deterring, and, above all, punishing them (Franko 2019). Examples of these practices are everywhere: migration funnelling, detention, prolonged waiting, and forced deportation, to name but a few. I conceptualise these state-led practices, which intentionally make everything more, to put it mildly, unpleasant for the migrant, as dysphemistic practices.

By focusing on the Mexican case, this paper explores the ambivalences in the global governance of migration which, while endorsing euphemistic rhetoric in international compacts and agreements, such as the Global Compact of Migration, encourages co-bordering agreements that imply fierce migration controls and dysphemistic practices. I claim that, on the one hand, the use of euphemisms in migration politics are strategic responses by states which, at the risk of being seen as norm-violating states, are forced to make polite statements and applaud the presence of non-binding agreements. On the other hand, bordering practices of animosity and contempt towards migrants are fostered and perpetuated by global migration management agreements and practices, such as externalisation and remote control, whose *raison d'être* is deterrence and restriction. Both euphemistic rhetoric and dysphemistic practices are therefore central to critically examining the global governance of migration. My aim is to highlight not only the discrepancy between discourse and practice, but to propose that this discrepancy is

intentional and indeed essential to the functioning of a ‘gated globalism’ (Cunningham 2001 p. 382) international order.

By analysing the intentionality of euphemisms and dysphemisms, this paper brings a new focus to socio-legal studies on migration (García 2021; Haddeland and Franko 2021). The analysis here presented sheds light on the geopolitical entanglements and asymmetries that shape the discourses and practices of migration governance in transit countries and, therefore, speaks to the scholarship that critically examines migration diplomacy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2021; Kutz and Wolff 2020), as well as externalisation arrangements (Bjorklund Belliveau and Ferguson 2021; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2016; Frowd 2020). This paper also relates to the burgeoning literature around migration detention (Bosworth 2014; Campesi 2015; Conlon and Hiemstra 2017) and, more particularly, about migration management in Mexico (Angulo-Pasel 2021; Galemba et al. 2019; Olayo-Méndez, Haymes, and Vidal de Haymes 2014).

The first section of the article delves into methodological considerations. The following section analyses Mexico’s euphemistic migration rhetoric over the last two decades. I shed light on Mexico’s geopolitical moral dilemma by exploring, first, its role as an enforcer of migration and its migration diplomacy to ensure the containment, deportation, and deterrence of populations in transit through the country, and, second, its eagerness to be seen as an champion for migrants’ human rights in the international sphere. The last section explores the Mexican migration enforcement through the lenses of dysphemistic practices, in particular: (i) bureaucratic negligence, (ii) precarious infrastructure, and (iii) spatial fixation and waiting. What the analysis presented here shows is that the international community’s furore about having shared moral standards for managing migration is a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) that has meant little for the lives of migrants.

## Methods

In order to examine Mexico’s migration euphemistic rhetoric, I focus on the migration diplomacy that was set in motion following the inception of the Mexican Transit Control Regime in 2001. I focus my analysis on the main rhetorical figures that have shaped Mexico’s migration policy of containment, deportation, and deterrence through the analysis of publicly available deportation treaties, media positioning, and the most recent diplomatic-economic efforts to curb migration from Central America. I also analyse the transcriptions of the remarks made by Mexico’s Foreign Affairs Secretaries, Luis Videgaray and Marcelo Ebrard, in the framework of Intergovernmental Conferences on the Global Compact of Migration; the first, a preparatory meeting hosted by Mexico in 2017, and the second, during the adoption of the Global Compact in Morocco in 2018. The elements that guided the analysis in

both interventions were Mexico's positioning in relation to its own migration policy and relation to the US policy, and the pledges around to the Global Compact and its objectives. All documents (treaties and public statements) reviewed were in Spanish and the excerpts presented here were translated by the author, except for Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard's speech in 2018 which was given in English.

To examine the dysphemistic practices in Mexico's migration enforcement I draw on the narratives of 16 irregularised migrants (15 males and 1 female), 15 from Honduras and 1 from El Salvador. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019. Participants were, at the moment of the interview, in transit through Mexico and staying at a faith-based shelter located in Mexico's Bajío region. The criterion for selecting participants was that they had had at least one detention experience in Mexico. Interviews were conducted in a private space within the shelter and lasted approximately one hour and focused on the participants' experiences during detention, with particular attention to the material conditions, and the interactions with border agents as well as interactions with other detainees. The average age of the participants was 29 years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 52. Periods of detention goes from 2017 to 2019 and the detention facilities include: Tapachula, Tenosique, Palenque, Acayucan, San Luis Potosí, Mexico City, Coatzacoalcos, Piedras Negras, Saltillo, Villahermosa, and Reynosa. 5 of the 16 interviewees had been detained by Mexican authorities more than twice and 3 out of the 16 interviewees had experience of detention in Mexico and in the US. Interviews were conducted and analysed in Spanish.<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of the participants, only nationality, age and gender was asked, and the names that appear in this document are pseudonyms selected by the author.

I complement the analysis with archival information from Mexico's Migration Enforcement agencies, the Mexican Migration Institute, *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (hereafter INM) and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (hereafter COMAR), obtained through Freedom of Information Requests (FoI). FoI has proven to be an effective method of collecting data and investigating government practices, promoting accountability, as well as challenging traditionally secretive organisations such as those implementing migration and border policies (Belcher and Martin 2019; Walby and Luscombe 2020). The statistical information requested from these agencies was on availability, flexibility, and outcomes of regular migration channels from 2019 to 2021.<sup>2</sup> This information is referred to as INM-FoI or COMAR-FoI to distinguish it from that shared directly by the institutions through their websites or press releases.

### **Euphemistic Rhetoric: Migration Politics**

As Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas remind us, 'interests and power of state actors are affected by their position in migration systems

according to whether they are migration-sending, migration-receiving, or transit states' (2019, 115). In the case of Mexico, its migration policy and international staging is shaped by its four facets: being a country of emigration, transit, destination, and return, but also by an almost performative endeavour to be acknowledged internationally as a champion of migrants' human rights. In the last two decades, Mexico has maintained a discourse of protection and defence of migrants' human rights and in particular of the Central American migrant population. In this section I examine, first, the euphemistic rhetoric used by Mexico to shape its migration policy of containment, deportation, and deterrence, and, second, Mexico's rhetoric and positioning in light of the Global Compact on Migration. The analysis presented here sheds light on Mexico's consistent use of euphemisms in its migration policy and politics.

### ***Mexico as Migration Control Enforcer***

As a country of emigration, Mexico's economy is heavily dependent on remittances sent home by Mexicans abroad, mostly but not exclusively from the United States (Serrano Herrera and Vega 2021) and thus the narrative of migrant 'heroism' is deeply embedded in Mexico's official discourse (Newland and Patrick 2004). Since the last decade of the 20th century, Mexico has devoted special attention to programmes and institutions that serve the Mexican community abroad, as well as on positioning migration issues as a priority on the US-Mexico bilateral agenda (Délano 2011; Yrizar Barbosa and Alarcón 2010). In fact, Mexico's current role in controlling transit migration can be framed within this prioritisation. Vicente Fox's administration (2000–2006) goal was to create a proactive binational agenda seeking to reinforce the cooperation stated in NAFTA to bargain for a major migration reform for the irregular migrants in the US and increase the number of visas for Mexican immigrant workers (Délano 2009). Among the elements of negotiation was the role of Mexico in controlling irregular transit migration and reducing the porosity in its borders with Guatemala and Belize. In this scenario, the Plan of Action for Cooperation on Border Safety was signed on 22 June 2001 (US Department of State 2021). The plan established 'the commitment to Washington by the Vicente Fox administration in reducing the flow of undocumented migrants arriving at the conjoint border' (Sandoval Palacios 2003, 129), and thus it is considered as the establishment of the Mexican Transit Control Regime<sup>3</sup> (Campos-Delgado 2018).

After five years of implementation of the Mexican Transit Control Regime, and in the face of high numbers of apprehensions,<sup>4</sup> Mexico resorted to an euphemistic rhetoric and promoted its *deportation diplomacy* (Campos-Delgado 2022) with the mantra 'safe and orderly', euphemistic formula that at that time was not as widespread as it is today (Aradau 2001). Mexican authorities staged a comprehensive deportation diplomacy to ensure the



expulsion from Mexico of irregular migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. In May 2003, Mexico hosted the VIII Regional Conference on Migration where it was announced ‘the elaboration by Mexico and Guatemala, in collaboration with IOM, of a proposal for a general framework for the implementation of the Project for the Dignified, Safe and Orderly Return of Regional Migrants by Land’, to be discussed two months later in El Salvador. At the IX conference, held the following year in Panama, the ‘Guidelines for the Signing of Multi and/or Bilateral Agreements Between Member Countries of the Regional Conference on Migration Regarding the Repatriation of Regional Migrants by Land’ were agreed. Throughout 2005, Mexico signed three bilateral agreements with Central American nations. Mexico’s efforts culminated with the ‘Memorandum of Understanding for Orderly, Dignified, Prompt, and Safe Repatriation from Mexico’, signed between Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in May 2006 and ratified in July 2009. The addendums created by each nation details specific considerations, such as border crossing areas, times and places for the reception, buses’ maximum occupancy, and determination and considerations in respect of vulnerable groups, which included unaccompanied minors. In July 2009, the Members of the Regional Conference on Migration agreed upon the establishment of ‘Regional Guidelines for the Care of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the Context of Repatriation’ which stress the importance of diplomatic or consular representation during detention and the appointment of a guardian during transfer, but also the need for deterrence campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, these expulsion guidelines and procedures, riddled with references to a ‘dignified, orderly, expeditious, and safe’ migration, shed light on Mexico’s long-established use of the euphemistic care-control rhetoric that currently dominates global migration diplomacy.

Until then, the care-control rhetoric was only present in international agreements, but it was with the enactment of the Migratory Act (*Ley de Migración*) in 2011 that it was fully integrated into Mexico’s borderwork (Campos-Delgado and Côté-Boucher 2022; Galemba et al. 2019; Torres et al. 2022). INM jargon is full of euphemisms: the apprehensions or interceptions of irregular migrants are called *aseguramientos*, securisations; when migrants are taken and registered in the detention facilities, they are said to be *presentados*, presented, to the Mexican authorities<sup>6</sup>; migrants in INM custody are not referred to as detainees, but are said to be *alojados*, housed; the action of transferring an un/accompanied migrant minor to the shelters of the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* - DIF) is referred as *canalizar*, channelling. Further, expanding on the ‘*aseguramientos*’ euphemism, and aligned with a ‘humanitarian bordering’ approach (Pallister-Wilkins 2015), the INM calls its migration control actions ‘rescues’ (Torre Cantalapiedra 2019). Yet, these ‘rescue’ operations, implemented in collaboration with multiple security



forces, respond to and operate under a securitisation angle, which may be why the outcome of these so-called rescues is not protection but expulsion. In this 'save and deport' logic, migrants are rescued from criminal organisations, merciless smugglers, the dangers of nature and, mainly, from themselves and their choices (Inda and Dowling 2013). Hence, by resorting to the euphemism of 'rescue', Mexican authorities, like many other authorities around the world (Williams 2016), attempt to divert attention from the political, regulatory and procedural decisions that precede and trigger this drama in the first place.

Nevertheless, it is important to say that, unlike other transit states, Mexico, albeit partially, recognises the insecurity and widespread violence on the migrant trail as a problem that must be addressed by national justice institutions. Mexico's paradoxes of protection have been examined by Rebecca Galemba and her colleagues (2019, 65) who, drawing on Didier Fassin's conceptualisation 'compassionate repression' (Fassin 2012), write, 'In Mexico, we found that "compassionate repression" manifests through enhanced resources dedicated to detecting, deterring, and deporting migrants alongside growing humanitarian concern for both serious crimes committed against migrants and the plight of refugees'. An example of this 'paradox of protection' is the *tarjeta de visitante por razones humanitarias*, a temporary immigration status for migrants who have suffered or witnessed, and can prove, a crime during their stay in Mexican territory, granting this temporary stay while their case is being investigated. Yet, as Carla Angulo-Passel (2021, 15) aptly points out, this measure ended up being 'a stopgap that lacks meaningful rights for migrants', where migrants are revictimised, mired in inefficient bureaucratic processes, and have no access to justice.

Finally, another area where euphemistic rhetoric has been incorporated into borderwork is expulsions. In an attempt to veil the forcible nature of the expulsions (Dünnwald 2013), Mexican authorities have opted to move away from the term 'deportation' embracing the notion of assisted returns. In 2007 the INM expelled 113,206 migrants, 38% of which were registered as deportation. In contrast, in 2019, 149,812 migrants were expelled and only 2% was framed as deportation (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2019).

The notion of 'siblinghood' is perhaps the most present and yet ambivalent figure of speech in Mexico's migration diplomacy. The phrase '*nuestros hermanos centroamericanos*', our Central American siblings, has been used by politicians and advocates alike to allude to the Pre-Columbian cultural heritage shared between Mexican and Central American populations.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in contrast to the Australian government's use of the 'Pacific family' analogy emphasising a relationship based on equality, morality, and respect (Wallis 2021), Mexico's siblinghood narrative is deeply patronising. Mexico defines itself as the big brother whose role is to look after but also supervise its smaller brothers, the Central American nations. This analogy, rather than extolling socio-cultural ties, reproduces the historically entrenched power asymmetries

that exist between these nations, where Mexico has behaved as the abusive sibling.<sup>8</sup> Conveniently, the parent(s) of this dysfunctional family are not present in the rhetoric, due to colonial reminiscences we might point to Spain, but due to the invasive history of the United States in the region, they could well be seen as an abusive stepfather, whose decisions and ambitions are suffered by these stepchildren who somehow need to overcome and organise around this (Buchenau 1996). In this sense, through this euphemism, a sort of relabelling is made, 'to blur reality, not so much to avoid offence, but to deceive' (Allan and BurrIDGE 2006, 96), to deceive about the nature of the Mexico-Central America relationship in an attempt to blur underlying power asymmetries.

The instrumentalization of an alleged siblinghood between Mexico and Central America in migration politics is not new, yet this notion has been used by the recent administration more intensely. Months before being appointed as Mexican president, in October 2018, Andres Manuel López Obrador stated: 'Here I digress to also refer to our Central American migrant siblings,<sup>9</sup> to tell them that they can count on us. I offered work visas to poor Central Americans who leave their country because they have no options. Why am I offering this to Central Americans? Because there will be work for Mexicans and work for Central Americans in our country' (AMLO 2018). Similarly, in April 2021, given the increase in the number of unaccompanied minors detained by Mexican migration authorities during January and March of that year, López Obrador resorted to the siblinghood narrative to call for commiseration from the migrants: 'I would like to take this opportunity to tell our Central American siblings, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans, to help us so that children are not used in this migratory situation' (Presidencia de la República 2021).

Furthermore, the supposed siblinghood between Mexican and Central American countries is used by the Mexican government to legitimise its intervention in the politics and economy of these countries. Based on a 'developmentalist optimism' (De Haas 2010), Mexico's strategy aims 'to promote development and decent conditions for all people in their communities of origin so that migration is an option and not a necessity' (SRE 2019). After almost two years of lobbying, the United States Agency for International Development – USAID – together with the Mexican Agency for International Cooperation and Development – AMEXCID – announced the launch of *Sembrando Oportunidades*, 'a new framework for development cooperation to address the root causes of irregular migration from northern Central America' (USAID 2021). However, to the dismay of the Mexican president, until March 2022, the US Congress had not released the resources for this programme, and the most recent world crisis has caused the immediate budgetary and solidarity priorities of the United States to be shifted to another hemisphere: 'They have just authorised the resources for Ukraine and that is

fine, because it is their policy to protect Ukraine, they have decided that; but this was approved by the US Congress I think in two days, and the support for our Central American siblings has been there for almost four years and has not been approved' (Presidencia de la República 2022). The reality is that *Sembrando Oportunidades* is a programme, like the many others before it, that seeks to erase, with the stroke of a pen, the reality that violence, and not poverty, is the main reason for the migration of thousands of Central Americans, and continues the erroneous and colonialist belief that building opportunities for the young population is somehow anchored to better training for agricultural work or vocational workshops (Heidbrink and Frank-Vitale 2021). Thus, by promoting this simplistic developmentalist approach, Mexico reproduces the belief that most of this population travels in the hope of achieving the much-vaunted 'American dream', refusing to accept the reality that it is not a dream they seek but an escape from a nightmare.

### ***De Mexico Para el Mundo: The Global Compact Era***

'Euphemistic expressions', Allan and Burrige (2006, 96) write, 'can of course be motivated by a desire not to offend, but they are also motivated by the wish to display in-group identity markers, the wish to upgrade whatever they denote, and even the display of wit'. In this sense, Mexico's international staging and rhetoric should be read as motivated by an interest not only in being part of the group of states that defend and protect the human rights of migrants, but also in being recognised as a pioneer, and in separating itself, albeit moderately, from the US rhetoric that contravenes those shared values enshrined in the Global Compact on Migration. Thus, it is no coincidence that although Mexico's migration management agencies, INM and COMAR, are under the Ministry of the Interior, all matters related to and surrounding the Global Compact have been delegated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This section does not address the content of the Compact (see for instance: Chetail 2020; Guild, Basaran, and Allinson 2019; Micinski 2021; Pécoud 2021), rather, it explores Mexico's positioning in relation to this agreement by examining the public statements of Mexican representatives at the two key meetings of the Compact.

In 2017, amid intense questioning of the implementation of *Programa Frontera Sur*, launched in 2014 (Boggs 2015), Mexico hosted a preparatory meeting aimed at 'shaping the vision' of the Global Compact for Migration. However, Mexico's migration diplomacy was not limited to hosting the event but, its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Juan José Gómez Camacho, was co-facilitator of the negotiations. Thus, despite its problematic and highly questioned migration policies, Mexico positioned itself in history as a key actor in the realisation of the Global Compact. In this sense, it was not fortuitous that

during the inauguration ceremony, Mexico's Foreign Affairs Secretary (President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration 2012–2018), Luis Videgaray, distanced Mexico's migration management from the rhetoric of the US President Donald Trump, emphasised the Global Compact as a collective endeavour, and affirmed the leadership vacuum left by the US withdrawal from the negotiations:

Mexico does not believe in the criminalisation of migrants, Mexico does not believe in walls, it believes in bridges, and we do not believe that any country, no matter how big and powerful it may be, can face the migratory phenomenon on its own. We therefore regret the position of the United States to withdraw from this collective effort, an effort to improve the lives of millions of people around the world. Undoubtedly, any country, as is the case of Mexico and the United States, in the full exercise of its sovereignty, has the right to define its migration policies. The United States is no exception. We respect that right absolutely. However, what is lost here is an opportunity, an opportunity to exercise leadership, an opportunity to influence, an opportunity to work together to address a phenomenon that concerns us all (SRE 2017).

However, the distancing was not total and shortly after this public reprimand, he acknowledged the importance of the US-Mexico relationship: 'Mexico will continue to work closely and constructively with the United States. Finally, there are close to 12 million Mexicans living in the United States and our relationship is intense, not only in terms of trade or investment, but also in terms of migration. And with the United States we will continue to maintain a relationship based on the principles promoted by this effort to build the Global Compact'. In short, Videgaray's speech showed all the nuances of Mexico's geopolitical dilemma over the last two decades. A geopolitical dilemma that, as the recent deployment of militarised forces on the southern border demonstrated,<sup>10</sup> is not confined to one party or one federal administration (Alba 2021).

Yet, before Mexico yielded to Trump's threats and agreed 'to increase enforcement to curb irregular migration, to include the deployment of its *Guardia Nacional* throughout Mexico, giving priority to its southern border' (US Department of State 2019), at the Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration in Morocco, Mexico's Foreign Affairs Secretary (President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration 2018–2024), Marcelo Ebrard, gave a moving speech in which he questioned countries and political groups' position that 'migration is a danger, that it has to be avoided, and that what is needed is to defend borders' (SRE 2018). Speaking like a true idealist, Ebrard posed questions that challenge exclusion, criminalisation, institutions, and close-door policies: 'What if everything were different? What if migrants weren't criminalized? What if poverty weren't an excuse for abuse? What if we could build different institutions? What if we could open the door to those in need?' (SRE 2018). Finally, he proclaimed a change in policy in line with the Compact's principles:

I would like to say that just as Mexico was a very active promoter [of the Compact], now, of all the countries, we are the most committed to carrying it out and we will do that without question. Mexico is going to change its migration policy; Mexico is going to make you proud of the Compact we have adopted for safe, orderly and regular migration. *We are going to change things and our actions will prove the truth of our words*

(SRE 2018, *emphasis added*).

While Marcelo Ebrard follows the path of his predecessor and uses his speech as a display of moral lessons, as his speech is framed in terms of Mexico's accession to the Compact, he makes promises about the translation of these norms into practice. In fact, his concluding remark: 'We are convinced and determined to comply with and defend the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. And we will meet soon, so that our actions will speak for us' (SRE 2018), was more of an empty promise than a pledge. The promises made by the Mexican state through Ebrard's speech, as will be examined in the following section, have not been fulfilled; Mexico has not become a country that respects and defends the human rights of irregular migrants in its territory; rather, the violence and abuses exercised have been greater than those of the previous administration.

### **Dysphemistic Practices: Migration Enforcement**

While euphemisms are discursive strategies of verbal mitigation, dysphemisms are strategies of aggravation that aim to highlight the more pejorative features in an offensive way. Long examined and conceptualised by linguists (Allan and Burridge 1991; Crespo-Fernández 2013), migration research has found this concept useful in rethinking visual representations (Martinez Lirola 2014) and the polarisation and politicisation in the migration debate (Lafiandra 2020). Building on and expanding this, I propose to use the lens of dysphemisms to examine migration enforcement. That is, to examine migration enforcement as practices that intentionally 'disparage, humiliate and degrade' (Allan and Burridge 2006, 31) the irregularised migrant population.

Ernesto, a male migrant from Honduras, compellingly summarises the dysphemistic rationale of Mexican migration enforcement: 'The problem', he said, 'is that they think: if I treat him well he will return, but if I treat him badly he will wish he had not come here, he will not return' (Ernesto, 2019). By reflecting on his own experience in Acayucan, Veracruz, where he was denied medical attention, Ernesto poignantly unravels the use of cruel and illegal practices as a strategy to deter migration. In this section, I examine three dysphemistic practices: (i) bureaucratic negligence, (ii) precarious and abysmal infrastructure, and (iii) temporal borders and spatial fixation. These dysphemistic practices shed light on the derogatory actions, spaces, and dynamics in Mexico's migration management. Furthermore, the analysis of these practices shows the intentional merging of humiliation, punishment, and

deterrence and reveals that, despite the rhetoric, there is an underlying contempt for the migrant population.

Mexico's dysphemistic practices of migration control must be examined in relation to the migration and border governance arrangements signed by Mexico and the US over the last two decades. As a result of these agreements, the entire Mexican territory has become a border-zone where migration control measures are applied to deter and contain migration in transit to the US' southern border (Campos-Delgado 2018; Hiemstra 2019; Vogt 2018). Partnerships and co-bordering arrangements such as this one are not exceptional, but fundamental in the global governance of migration. Proof of this is that, despite ample evidence of the degrading treatment and human rights violations they foster (Bialasiewicz 2012; Bousiou 2022; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022), the Global Compact on Migration's goal 23 calls for 'Strengthening international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration'. Hence, the Compact 'strongly defends existing human rights standards at its core, but concurrently submits to political will and tolerates conditions of vulnerability, with potentially grave implications for human rights' (Guild, Basaran, and Allinson 2019, 49). This therefore means not only a constant discrepancy between discourse and practice, but that dysphemistic practices are as much a product of the global migration governance as euphemistic rhetoric.

### ***Bureaucratic Negligence***

As stated by the Global Detention Project (2021, 7), Mexico has 'one of the world's largest immigration detention infrastructure'. From 2019 to 2021 Mexican authorities intercepted 572,998 migrants, with 2021 being the year with most apprehensions in Mexico's history. Even though the Global Compact for Migration in its objective 13 calls to use detention of migrants only as a last resort and to seek other alternatives, detention continues to be a de facto measure after interception. Migrants apprehended by Mexican authorities are invariably 'presented' in a detention facility. As of 2018, Mexico had 51 detention centres with a total holding capacity of 4,443 detainees and the country's level of containment is such that 31 of Mexico's 32 states have a detention centre (INM-FoI, 2019).

Mexico has followed the global tendency of 'datafication' of migration management (Witteborn 2022), a trend which, although questioned, is placed as the first objective of the Global Compact. Thus, when a migrant is transferred to detention, an administrative file must be created that consists of (1) a description of the situation that motivated the apprehension, (2) notes of the hearing, (3) medical certificate, (4) physical description and biometric information -photography and fingerprints-, (5) an inventory of belongings and values, (6) document signed by the migrant in which he/she admits his/her



knowledge of the rights and duties in detention, and (7) migratory resolution. It is during the hearing that migrants should be informed of their rights, such as their alternatives or options for regularisation, as established in Article 226 fraction IV of the Regulations of the Migratory Act (*Reglamento de la Ley de Migración*). However, in reality the hearing is used to extract information rather than to provide it. And while the official description seems to refer to a mere administrative register, the information collected at the hearing is in fact key to a datafication process ‘to visualising, registering, mapping, monitoring and profiling’ (Broeders and Dijstelbloem 2016, 243) this population. The information is ‘used by authorities to adapt their tactics and apprehension operations to create statistics on which Central American regions are expelling the most migrants and the most popular crossing points at the US-Mexico border, as well as to strengthen national and international inter-agency cooperation’ (Campos-Delgado 2021a, 8).

Participants reported that they had signed documents without knowing their contents, that they were unaware of their rights and duties in detention, and that they had been expelled without speaking to their consuls. In addition, human rights observers have denounced the lack of interpreters or translators for the non-Spanish speaking population as well as cohesion for requesting an ‘assisted return’ (CCINM 2017; Yrizar Barbosa et al. 2022). In Mexico, migrants are not presented to an impartial and independent judge and migratory resolutions are determined discretionally by border agents. In a nutshell, migrants are denied their right to justice. All this goes a step further than Martina Tazzioli’s ‘governing through confusion and chaos’ (2020, 60) and stands as evidence of fully-fledged *Bureaucratic negligence*. With this term I refer to the intentional misinformation given to migrants about administrative processes and/or the underperformance of state agents in these procedures. Hence, bureaucratic negligence means not only the lack of information obtained about their migration procedures, but it the deprivation of migrants’ access to their rights, including the right to seek asylum, complementary protection or residence permit on humanitarian grounds.

Yet, it would be a mistake to point the finger at the Mexican authorities as the sole actors in this dysphemistic practice. The consuls of the countries of origin play a complex role but are as much a part of this dysphemistic practice as the Mexican authorities, particularly for the Central American population, for whom a ‘bordering through expulsion’ operates (Campos-Delgado 2021b). On the one hand, it is their official duty to aid and assist their compatriots while, on the other hand, they are key actors in the expulsion machinery because of their role in the *deportation diplomacy*. They must certify the citizenship of detainees prior to expulsion and, given the large number of Central American detainees, this is not an easy administrative task. As Bryan describes, when migrants carry their documents, the interaction is minimal: ‘The consul only asked for the identity number, place of birth and date of birth



to see if it matched and that's it, he gives the final signature for deportation' (Bryan, 2019). However, when migrants do not carry their documents, as happens in most cases, the process of citizenship certification is done through a short interrogation that involves asking for common sites, dishes, and other cultural references to identify the person's belonging. This process is a huge interpretative stretch for a 'proof of legal identity and proper documentation' as requested in Goal 4 of the Global Compact. However, consuls' involvement in the expulsion machinery is the only option available to improve the immediate care of their nationals, minimising the time they spend in detention facing conditions that, as discussed below, are directly detrimental to their wellbeing (Campos-Delgado 2021a). Yet, although it is a pragmatic intervention, it is key in reproducing the vulnerability of the migrant population and of the control regime as a whole because it normalises the precariousness of detention conditions as well as the expedited expulsions. Furthermore, while it is unrealistic and unfeasible for consular officials to ask Mexican authorities to 'release this person back into Mexico to continue his/her journey',<sup>11</sup> by not expanding on the migration reasons and limiting the intervention to a sociocultural citizenship certification, consular officials are complicit in Mexico's violation of the principle of non-refoulement and in continuing the reproduction of the seemingly never-ending border circuit of 'cross, apprehend, deport, cross' (Nail 2016, 30).

### ***Precarious and Abysmal Infrastructure***

Mexico's detention centres are euphemistically called *estancias/estaciones migratorias*, but the architecture and dynamics of these spaces resemble a prison more than a place of sojourn. Overcrowding, soiled and stained bed sheets, lack of running water, are just some of the problems migrants face while in detention. The appalling infrastructure of detention centres is perhaps the best example of a dysphemistic practice in migration management, where conditions are intentionally unpleasant and hostile for irregularised migrants. In response to Mexico's third periodic report, the UN Committee on Migrant Workers said in 2017: 'The Committee is concerned at the conditions of detention of the migrant population in the State party. It notes with great concern that in some cases conditions amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment' (CMW 2017, 8).

Mexico's detention centres are torturing environments that 'immobilises migrants in a necropolitical limbo, which destroys hope as much as human integrity' (Manek, Galán-Santamarina, and Pérez-Sales 2022, 1). They are a materialisation of the dehumanisation and criminalisation that underlies migration enforcement in the country. Human rights organisations have consistently pointed out the poor infrastructure and appalling conditions in which migrant detainees are held, such as overcrowded, poorly lit, and

unventilated cells (Barja Coria 2015). In fact, in some centres, detainees eat on the floor of the courtyard – if there is one – or inside their cells (CNDH 2019; Yrizar Barbosa et al. 2022). Edwin's experience illustrates this. He was detained for 12 days in Tenosique until he was transferred to Tapachula before his deportation. During that time, he did not have the opportunity to shower and was locked up all day in a cell, equipped only with a toilet (Edwin, 2019). Similarly, Agustina recounted how her right to privacy was violated and explained how while detained in the San Luis Potosi detention centre she had to devise strategies to shower without being seen by other detainees because the shower and toilets had no door (Agustina, 2019). Edwin and Agustina's experiences are not atypical and although migration detention should not be punitive, these practices demonstrate the opposite. Using the rhetoric of the Global Compact, by failing to provide adequate accommodation, Mexico's migration detention does not safeguard the physical and mental integrity of migrants. And, therefore, the Mexican authorities must be held accountable for the lasting negative effects on migrants generated by the appalling detention conditions in which they are forced to live.

While it is unquestionable that the political economy of the scarcity in the INM affects the conditions of migration detention centres (Campos-Delgado and Côté-Boucher 2022; Carte 2017), it is essential to mention that their degrading conditions, as well as the disinterest in improving and dignifying them, is also a mechanism to deter detainees from initiating or continuing a regularisation procedure and, ultimately, accessing their rights in Mexico. Romel's reaction to my question about whether he had been informed about his right to apply for humanitarian protection in Mexico City's detention facility, is testament to this. Romel recounted how the authorities did inform him but also mentioned that he would have to remain in the facility throughout the process until he was granted refugee status. This information was key to him desisting and requesting the assisted return to Honduras: 'I was only there for two days. They told me if I wanted to [apply for refuge], that I had to stay longer, but no, I told them that I didn't want to stay longer, that they should deport me, because it's hard being locked up' (Romel, 2019). In other words, the fact that these spaces are intentionally conceived as short stay also are a proof of how Mexico views itself as a country of transit and migratory containment, that is, as a country that expels, preferably quickly, the migrants who pass through it.

### ***Temporal Borders and Spatial Fixation***

Mexico's temporal borders are deeply connected with the spatial mechanisms of b/ordering migrants. This can be seen, for example, in the distinction between the maximum length of time migrants can be detained in the three type of detention centres: (1) no longer than 60 days in the *Estaciones*

*Migratorias*, Immigration Removal Centres (hereafter IRC), (2) no longer than 48 hours in the *Estancias Provisionales Tipo A*, Provisional Immigration Removal Station Type A (hereafter PIRSA), and (3) no longer than 7 days in the *Estancias Provisionales Tipo B*, Provisional Immigration Removal Station Type B (hereafter PIRSB). Although this time criterion is not usually applied, administratively it defines key aspects, such as infrastructure and staffing needs, which together influence the conditions of detainees.

According to the Migratory Act, the migration situation of foreigners detained must be resolved within 15 working days, and in extraordinary situations<sup>12</sup> no more than 60 working days. Swiftness is a main feature of migration management in Mexico: short-stay centres, and swift deportations – 74% of detainees are held for a maximum of five days (CNDH 2019, 93). It is noteworthy that detainees are not informed of the time limits for detention, nor of the status of their own case, the vast majority are informed a few hours before being expelled. As exemplified in Marlon's narration, prior-to-deportation transfers take the form of a *spatial sweep*: 'when they detain you, they ask you for your identity card and the next day they send you off. They move us, little by little until we reach the border with Guatemala, and from there they send us back to Honduras in one trip' (Marlon, 2019). Routinely, PIRSAs and PIRSBs hold migrants until they are transferred into an IRC. IRCs with higher hosting capacity – Tapachula (960), Acayucan (836) and Mexico City (464) – function as mass deportation centres, i.e., migrants detained by other detention centres arrive there and deportations are carried out according to nationality.

Those who do not end up being deported experience a more violent dimension of Mexico's temporal borders. A close examination of release statistics of migrants on a regularisation path sheds light on illegal and worrying practices. From 2017 to 2019, Mexican authorities released from detention 2,412 people to regularise their immigration status. 326 were detained longer than the statutory period in extraordinary circumstances, 113 out of whom were minors. 110 out of the 326 were held in Provisional Stations and 37 in *oficinas de representación*, that is, in offices of the INM in those states. That is, this population was not only punished with prolonged detention, but also held in inadequate accommodation. Of the multiple irregularities detected in these statistics, one case stands out for all the regulations it violates: the releasing in July 2019 of 2 persons (2yo male and 30yo female from Honduras) after 377 days in detention in the office of the Local Representation San Miguel de Allende (INM-FoI, 2022). Mexico's temporal borders, as in other regimes, have both a deterrent and a disciplinary function (Conlon 2011; Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021).

Migrants seeking humanitarian protection in Mexico face the regime's entrenched *bureaucratic negligence*, but are also subject to a double penalty, through temporal borders and 'spatial fixation' (Tazzioli 2020). According to

a report by Asylum Access, ‘Mexican law requires asylum cases be decided within 45 working days, or 90 days in exceptional circumstances; however, the data shows that tens of thousands of asylum seekers are forced to wait well beyond the legal limit’ (2020, 1). In 2019, COMAR resolved the application of only 16% of the applications dealt with that year; in 2020, this percentage increased to 34% (COMAR-FoI, 2022a). However, it is true that when a case is finally resolved, there is a relatively high number of positive responses to refugee status, for example, a rate of 66% in 2019 (COMAR-FoI, 2022b). Although the number of applications triplicated in 2021 from 2019, the percentage of requests filled through the INM decreased dramatically from 80% in 2019 to 19% in 2021 (COMAR-FoI, 2022c) showing the impact of strategies, like the one used with Romel, that aim to discourage potential refugee seekers in the custody of migration authorities.

The low decision rate also affects the mobility of migrants, forcing them into a spatial fixation. Migrants must remain in the state in which they have filed the application, otherwise they may lose a hearing and their application would end up being rejected. This, given that most COMAR offices are located in the southern border states, perpetuates the strategy of spatial containment that seeks to enclose mobility in the south of the country. For instance, in 2020, 65% of the applications were filled in Chiapas (COMAR-FoI, 2022c). Moreover, *bureaucratic negligence* is such that, as narrated by Julian, migrants are led to believe that status is spatially limited to the states where they applied, i.e., that status is granted on a state rather than federal basis: ‘I haven’t thought about it because to think about refuge you have to consider the country, and Mexico has good states, but good states don’t give you asylum. For example, I rented a room in Minatitlán, in a town where you see dead people all the time and I say if Mexico is like that then it’s the same as in my country’ (Julian, 2019).

The temporal borders together with the spatial fixation, leads to a significant percentages of abandonment or withdrawal by the applicant, 11% in 2019 (Asylum Access 2020). Juan’s story is a case in point; he applied for refugee status in 2019 during his fourth trip through Mexico but decided to travel back to Honduras because his mother was ill, and he was told that the process would take at least eight months. A year later, he returned to Mexico and tried to follow up on his application in Tenosique. He waited 27 days in that city only to discover that he had to wait longer and file more paperwork. ‘I made the refugee application [in Saltillo]’, Juan tells me, ‘but what happened is that I got desperate and didn’t follow the procedure, I missed two signatures and they cancelled everything. That was the problem I had in Tenosique [when I wanted to restart the process]. I filled out the whole form, but to have the certificate they told me I had to send something, like a pardon, saying why I had left the previous application’. Juan decided not to pursue his second refugee claim in Mexico, but to continue his journey to the United States,

a country where he has already experienced migration detention and where, as in Mexico, migrants systematically face dehumanising treatment and deprivation of basic needs (Human Rights First 2022; Martinez, Slack, and Heyman 2013).

## Conclusion

This paper sheds light on Mexico's geopolitical moral dilemma and specifically the disjuncture between rhetoric and practice. To unravel this disjuncture, and above all to highlight its intentionality, I propose the analytical lenses of euphemisms and dysphemisms: euphemistic rhetoric as a verbal mitigation strategy to detach the negative connotations of migration enforcement and dysphemistic practices as derogatory and degrading actions and practices aimed at controlling, deterring, but above all punishing migrants. Further, I highlight that the Mexican case is not an exception but instead a showcase of the ambivalence in the global management of migration, which, while promoting euphemistic rhetoric through international agreements that claim to seek the protection of migrants' human rights, at the same time encourages co-bordering partnerships whose *raison d'être* is to dissuade and restrict mobility and which end up materialising in dysphemistic practices towards the migrant population.

For over two decades now, Mexico has resorted to the 'orderly, safe and regular' mantra, used an euphemistic rhetoric, and claimed to have a strong interest in protecting migrants' human rights, while in practice in Mexico irregularised migrants' human rights are violated on daily basis either by the state-led structural violence or by the criminal violence, which continues to be 'tolerated and permitted' (Pérez Díaz and Díaz Ramos 2022) by the Mexican state. This paper empirically contributes to broadening the understanding and questioning of the administrative processes of migration management in Mexico, an area still little explored (Carte 2017). Hence, although in this paper I focus only on Mexico's dysphemistic practices in detention, as shown by the vast literature on violence and hostility in the migrant trail (Brigden 2018; París Pombo 2017; Vogt 2018), these practices are not constrained to that domain but are present in all the fields of migration enforcement.

The commitments and pledges made by Mexico in the context of the Global Compact of Migration have not been translated into day-to-day borderwork or into a more comprehensive approach to protecting and reducing the vulnerability of the irregularised migrant population in the country. While it could be argued that is related to a question of framing – it has been framed as a matter exclusively for the international arena and diplomacy, as exemplified by the notable absence of public statements from the INM on this issue –, I argue that this lack of practical translation it is directly related to the nature

of Mexico's migration enforcement actions, that is, as a transit control regime. And therein lies Mexico's geopolitical moral dilemma: while at an international level it claims to be an eager protector of migrants' human rights, at a regional level it has openly agreed to curb transit migration and acts as a border-zone.

If we take the words of Mexico's Foreign Affairs Secretary, Marcelo Ebrard – 'our actions will speak for us' –, and we 'hear' the actions more than the words, we can say that Mexico is not even close to being a compliant with all the principles it has vowed to uphold. In Mexico, there seem to be two types of migrants: those in the discourse, whose human rights are inalienable, and those of flesh and blood, who are subjected with impunity to cruel and illegal practices on a daily basis.

## Notes

1. The interviews were conducted in the framework of the research project 'Immigration Removal Centres as the epicentre of the securitisation of migration: an insight into the Mexican case', which was evaluated by the Comité d'éthique de la recherche – Société et culture (CER-SC) of the Université de Montréal.
2. It should be noted that the information provided sometimes has inconsistencies with publicly available information, however the information provided by these bodies through FoI is considered official and certified. These discrepancies are the subject of a broader discussion that goes beyond the scope of this paper on the registration and validity of information from public bodies in Mexico and the importance of maintaining accountability and transparency mechanisms.
3. The Mexican Transit Control Regime has been conceptualised differently throughout its more than 20 years of operation: 'border-country' (Yrizar Barbosa 2011), 'vertical border' (Yee Quintero and Torre Cantalapiedra 2016), 'arterial border' (Vogt 2017), however, the common feature of all of them is the criminal and systemic violence suffered by migrants in transit (Casillas 2007; Ruiz 2003). Violence which, it should be noted, is challenged on a daily basis by organised civil society, which through humanitarian aid and advocacy has for decades been radically hospitable to these population (Merlín-Escorza, Davids, and Schapendonk 2021). In this sense, although the regime now has characteristics of a 'humanitarian-military border' (Tazzioli 2015), it is crucial to underline that these have not arisen in a vacuum, but are anchored in the 'co-bordering' partnership between Mexico and the US established at the beginning of the 21st century (Longo 2016), which has, for example, enabled US funding and training, as well as fostered the expansion of Mexico's migrant detention infrastructure. And although throughout these decades, each Mexican presidential administration has had different migration control programmes, they all coincide in the same result: a greater securitisation of migration management in the country.
4. From 2001 to 2005, Mexican authorities reported 932,169 events of detained migrants, *alojados*, 94% of whom were Central Americans (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2019).
5. The establishment of this protocol was key for years later, in 2014, during the so-called crisis of unaccompanied minors at the southern border of the US (Antony and Thomas 2017), Mexico implemented a containment and deterrence strategy that culminated in



the expulsion of 2,347 unaccompanied minors in 2015 and 2,716 in 2016 (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2019).

6. However, migrants are not brought before any other authority. In Mexico, unlike in the US and other countries, there are no immigration judges or courts. The INM is in charge of enforcing immigration law in all its procedures. Normally the migratory resolution, is determined when the migrant is registered at the *Estancia/Estación Migratoria* by the border agent on duty, normally the same one who carried out the apprehension.
7. The region's ties and networks have remained in place in the post-Columbian era. For centuries, border porosity has been the main characteristic of Mexico's southern border region, allowing for extensive and deep-rooted cultural, social and economic relations between the inhabitants of both sides of the almost physically non-existent border (Fábregas Puig 2005; Galemba 2012).
8. The establishment of the Mexico-Guatemala border in 1882 is an example of the unequal and largely advantageous relationship that Mexico has maintained with its southern neighbours. The delimitation of the borderline was preceded by an invasion and annexation of the Soconusco region to Mexican territory by then Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna. With the formalisation of the agreement, Guatemala ceded approximately 27,949 square kilometres of territory to Mexico and received in exchange some 3,105 square kilometres of territory (Luján Muñoz 1998; Toussaint 1997).
9. In his speeches Andrés Manuel López Obrador uses the term '*hermanos centroamericanos*', that would directly translate as 'Central American brothers', however, here it is translated as 'Central American siblings', as he, unlike other Spanish-speaking political leaders, uses the masculine plural.
10. In June 2019, US President Donald Trump publicly threatened to rise tariffs if Mexico did not tighten its border control and curb irregular migration. Mexican authorities' response was the deployment of around 20,000 agents of the newly formed *Guardia Nacional* to the southern border. That year Mexico apprehended 182,940 irregularised migrants, a similar figure to that recorded in 2014 and 2015 during the implementation of the much-questioned *Programa Frontera Sur*.
11. I am grateful to Reviewer 2 for this invitation to reflect more deeply on the possibilities and limitations of consular officials.
12. The law considers the following situations: (I) where no reliable information on a person's identity or nationality exists or where there are difficulties obtaining relevant documents; (II) where the consulate or consular sections of the country of origin of the person require more time for the issuance of travel and identity documents; (III) where there is an impediment for the person's travel through third countries or an obstacle to establishing the travel itinerary to the final destination; and (IV) where a person suffers from a recognised medical condition or is physically or mentally disabled, making it impossible for them to travel (DOF 2011). However, human rights monitors have consistently reported detention periods longer than those stipulated by law (CCINM 2017; CNDH 2019) and the recrudescence of these practices during 2020 and 2021 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yrizar Barbosa et al. 2022).

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



## Funding

The work was supported by the Centre International de Criminologie Comparée, Université de Montréal.

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