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Research article

# Recuperar la Patria: Xenophobic Sentiments in Costa Rica in the Context of the Nicaraguan Refugee Crisis 2018

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## Abstract

*This case study explores xenophobic sentiments and actions in Costa Rica during the refugee crisis from April to December 2018, caused by the internal political crisis in Nicaragua. By looking at Costa Rica's long histories of migration it is evident that xenophobic sentiments against Nicaraguans derive from long-lasting interconnections and migration movements between these two countries. This study demonstrates not only that much of nationalist and xenophobic discourses originate from prolonged historical arguments, but also that the global dimension of anti-migration sentiments has to be considered. Using neo-institutionalist theory, in particular historical and sociological institutionalism, this paper explores how the history of migration in Costa Rica has contributed to the creation of Costa Rican nationalism. Furthermore, by combining past and present examples, namely the history of migrations between Nicaragua and Costa Rica and actions by nationalist groups on social media channels, this paper contributes to a historically centered analysis to one of the central issues of the 21st century.*

**Keywords:** *refugees, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, xenophobia, social media, international migration*

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## **Introduction**

In the context of the political crisis in Nicaragua in April 2018 tens of thousands of Nicaraguans fled to Costa Rica to seek asylum and refuge. The majority of the Costa Rican population as well as the government reacted with solidarity and active assistance. Nevertheless, at the height of the migration movement in August 2018 xenophobic protests in the capital of Costa Rica, San José, were directed against the Nicaraguan refugees (CRHoy.com 2018). Since then, groups and activists have organized on different social media platforms, engaging in xenophobic and racist agitations against Nicaraguan migrants coming to Costa Rica, and also connecting themselves with international anti-refugee and migratory movements, activists and parties.

This may be surprising at first glance, since the perception of Costa Rica – from outside as well as from a self-reflective point of view – is linked to a democratic tradition and an overall a liberal political landscape (Werz 2008: 343-345). Costa Rica has an independent media landscape and introduced progressive policies in the last years, for example opening marriage to same-sex couples in 2020 via a sentence of the Supreme Court of Justice in August 2018 (INFOBAE 2018). Many of these characteristics are contrasted by Costa Rica's immediate neighbouring countries. A historically grown structural poverty has shaped for example Nicaragua for decades while in Costa Rica a middle class has emerged during the 20th century. Costa Rica also has the highest life expectancy – 80 years in 2018 – compared to the other Central American countries (World Bank 2019). Its image as a county of internal peace is symbolically represented by the 1949 abolition of the military while dictatorships and military coups characterized the other neighbouring countries, especially in the 20th century (Huhn 2008). For more than half a century Costa Rica also has positioned itself as a neutral country in foreign policy and has acted as a mediator in various conflicts in the past. All of this has brought Costa Rica the nickname 'Switzerland of Central America' and crated the image of Costa Rica as 'different' in the Central American context (Acuña Ortega 2002).

The narrative of Costa Rica's superior political and social status—which cause a strong sense of nationalism—is deeply rooted in at least two perspectives. The first perspective relates to the institutional design of Costa Rica's political structure—which created a solid democratic system in the country. The second perspective studies a racial myth fostered by an ethnic idea of a Costa Rican 'whiteness' compared to the rest of the countries of Central America. Using the neo-institutionalist theory, in particular historical and sociological institutionalism (Steinmo 2018), this paper explores how the processes in which political institutions and ethnicism in Costa Rica have built a xenophobic nationalism.

The implications of Costa Rica's nationalism are many. First, it leads to a strong xenophobic sentiment that could weaken the countries' social tissue, especially concerning Nicaraguan migrants. Second, history is used to justify excluding Costa Ricans from the ethnically diverse population. These two factors, deeply intertwined, have contributed to the creation of Costa Rica's national identity.

Nevertheless, recent research distances itself from these imprecise attributions and does not speak of a special case *per se* (Kordick 2019; Molina Jimenéz 2015; Díaz Arias 2014; Palmer & Molina 2004). Rather, the contradictions in the self-image, but also the interpretation of the historical process of the country are under critical review today. The fact that the Costa Rican identity which defines itself as 'white' and 'European' and therefore presents itself as different from the other Latin American societies (especially towards the neighbouring countries), seems problematic. The non-white population, *mestizos*, indigenous people, and people of African descent are often marginalized and not considered part of the history of Costa Rica which is still interpreted in terms of national history. Researchers today emphasize that it is necessary to look at ambiguities in the Costa Rican self-image, to take a new path of deconstructing national myths and to overcome traditional historiography (Sandoval-García 2010; Alvarenga Venutolo 1998).

This article intends to contribute to this reassessment by focusing on the recent migration movement of Nicaraguans into Costa Rica and the appearance of xenophobic groups agitating against Nicaraguans. I argue that the xenophobic sentiments against Nicaraguans are not something new in Costa Rican society, but the consequence of a long history of interactions between these two countries, especially in relation to migration. The overall goal is to show that prolonged historical attributions and imaginaries associated with Nicaraguans, reappear in times of crisis. The paper will focus on a limited timeframe from April 2018 to April 2020 and focus on a specific social media group called group *Recuperemos Costa Rica*. In the first part, I will establish the overall historical framework between the two countries, focusing on Costa Rica's and Nicaraguans interconnected history of migration. Second, I will elaborate on the events evolving in Nicaragua since 2018, causing the migration movement. Third, I will concentrate on the group *Recuperemos Costa Rica* where I will look at the groups neo-national ideology (Van Dijk 2006; Gingrich & Banks 2006) and analyse the contents of their anti-migrant discourse.

### **Histories of migration in Costa Rica**

Costa Rica's history can be defined as histories of migration. Starting with the immigration of various ethnic groups more than 20.000 years ago from North

America to the Southern part of the continent, to the violent conquest and integration of Mesoamerica into the Spanish colonial empire in the 16th century, and the forced displacement of African people in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. In this way, Costa Rica – and the Americas – appear as a place of intercultural encounters (Hensel 2019: 153-164).

Since the mid-19th century there has been a decisive change in terms of migration which is linked to the political independence of the Central American regions from Spain in 1821 and the creation of separate nation-states. Within this process various Central American states adopted the so-called agroexport model (*modelo agroexportador*) in which the region's economic growth became dependent to a greater part on the export profits of agricultural products such as coffee, bananas, sugar, and cotton. In Costa Rica, this economic-political model is associated with the intensive cultivation of coffee with its production centers in the *Valle Central* which includes the today's provinces of Alajuela, Heredia, San José, and Cartago. Compared to the other republics of Central America, Costa Rica started early with the production of coffee which around 1870 represented around 90 percent of Costa Rica's total exports (Samper 1993).

Coffee and later also banana plantations required modern technologies, such as railroad lines and ports for the interoceanic transport to Europe and the United States of America, but also a large number of seasonal workers who were able to cope with the physically difficult work in the tropical heat. Due to a persistent shortage of labour force the Costa Rican government and businesses started to implement immigration policies since the middle of the 19th century to overcome this situation. Initially the political and economic elites preferred Europeans which should also reinforce Costa Rica's 'white' identity. The elites were keen to identify themselves as descendants of 'poor' and 'white' Spanish settlers from colonial times in order to differentiate themselves from *mestizos* as well as from Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean communities (Palmer & Molina 2004: 2; Harpelle 2000: 29-30). However, the physically challenging work on the plantations was not desirable and simply too hard for most Europeans, and as a consequence the majority of them stayed in the cities where they worked as businessmen or merchants. Therefore, the government in San José started to depend on a workforce primarily by people from the Caribbean area, such as Jamaica and Haiti, or from neighbouring countries, like Nicaragua or Panama.

However, people coming from these regions did not fit the identity politics of the Costa Rican elite of the 19th century, because most of them were ethnically of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent. The elites were aware of this contradiction and the Costa Rican historian Patricia Alvarenga elaborates how this led to the construction of three types of migrants: First, there were the 'desired migrants', that is 'white' Europeans. Second 'unwanted migrants' who,

depending on the decade, were people of different ethnicities and nationalities and were prevented by laws from entering Costa Rica. At the beginning of the 20th century this affected, for example, people from China or the Ottoman Empire, but also people from Roma and Sinti communities. Third, there were those who were tolerated as a 'necessary evil', as Alvarenga calls it. This meant people of the neighbouring countries and regions who were tolerated due to the need of (cheap)labour force in the agricultural sector. Basically, the elites in Costa Rica had to subordinate their imaginary vision of a 'white' Costa Rica behind long-term economic ambitions. Further, Alvarenga emphasizes that this hierarchization was based on racist motives as well as eugenic and social Darwinist discourses that were circulating in the early 20th century (Alvarenga Venutolo 2011: 3-22). Thus, since the 19th century systematic discrimination practices and policies, can be identified, and were directed against immigrants and ethnic minorities who did not fit into the idea of 'white' Costa Rica. During the late 19th century, the Costa Rican state and the political elites established a long-term polarization within its society into a 'we', the Costa Ricans, and the 'others', migrants and ethnic minorities (Díaz Arias 2014: 59-70).

Looking at census data from 1864 to 1984 Nicaraguans represented the largest group of foreign citizens coming to Costa Rica followed by Jamaicans, Panamanians, and Europeans (Alvarenga Venutolo 2011: 10). Historically, there have been (at least) three major migration movements from Nicaragua to Costa Rica since the 19th century. The first took place in the middle of the 19th century and was related to the expansion of the plantation economy and the cultivation of coffee, bananas, and sugar. The main reason for Nicaraguans migrating to Costa Rica was due to economic considerations, because Costa Rica appeared to be economically more successful, whereas in contrast to Nicaragua, there were better job opportunities and – albeit small – social advancement was possible (Castro 2010). A second migration movement took place in the late 1970s and 1980s and was influenced by political events in Nicaragua, connected with the downfall of the Somoza family-dictatorship. Around 1977/78 when the support for the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) – then a guerrilla movement and since 1980s a political party – grew and a popular uprising against the dictatorship was eminent, the regime increased its repression against the population. Therefore, around 50.000 Nicaraguans sought exile in Costa Rica before the culmination of the revolution on 19 July 1979. Many returned in the 1980s, but soon the country was caught up in the next conflict, the so-called Contra War which made Nicaragua a hot spot of Cold War dynamics. Again, thousands fled to Costa Rica, but this time the economic crisis of the war also played its part, as well as unpopular measures by the FSLN government, such as compulsory military service. Oppositional politicians who opposed the policies of the FSLN in the 1980s also went

into exile to Costa Rica as well as to the USA (Baumeister, Fernández & Acuña 2004: 15; Basok 1990: 727).<sup>1</sup> After the defeat of the FSLN in the elections and the takeover of the government by Violetta Barrios de Chamorro in February 1990, a neo-liberal economic policy was implemented, supported by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These policies further intensified the economic crisis, already resilient due to the Contra War. The country's inflation, unemployment and poverty rates continued to rise, resulting in the third migratory movement in the 1990s (Sandoval-García 2017: 7).

It is important to note that the 1980s were a decisive turning point in regard to the migration situation in Central America in general (Lizcano Fernández 2000: 165-180), and also specifically considering migration movements of Nicaraguans into Costa Rica. In a study from 2008 the authors argue that up to the 1980s the socio-economic developments of Costa Rica and Nicaragua were quite similar in their overall structures; the annual economic growth was approximately the same in both countries, the traditional agricultural products (coffee, bananas, cotton, and sugar) remained central in the export sector and only two percent of the total population in both countries were living abroad. However, this changed at the beginning of the 1980s when Costa Rica invested in the cultivation of different agricultural products, like fruits, flowers, and wheat, as well as in tourism. The later had a significant impact on many other areas of the labour market, demanding, for example, training of bilingual staff for tourism businesses or investments in infrastructure. In general, an overall expansion of the tertiary work sector was in progress. One of the consequences was a decline of Costa Ricans working in agriculture and it was therefore have played a vital role for seasonal and later continuous emigration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica (Baumeister, Fernández & Acuña 2004: 72-73).

This also differs in numbers of earlier migration movements, but also in the fact that the majority of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica do not return to Nicaragua anymore. Since the late 1980s and then especially since the 1990s young Costa Ricans receive a better education and seek jobs that require higher education and university degrees. As a result, many of them go abroad, especially to the United States, but also to Europe which implies that there is again a shortage of labour in the agriculture sector. More importantly, there is also an increasing number of people needed in partially informal jobs, like housekeeping or baby-sitting – traditionally carried out by young women – as well as in construction,

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1 In the case of the USA, the migrants primarily belonged to the 'old' elites or middle-class people who already had networks in the USA or had the necessary financial means to migrate. A quarter of Nicaraguans over 25 years who came to the United States in the 1980s achieved a university degree, which stands out, compared to Salvadorans or Guatemalans. Nicaraguan social scientist Rocha Gómez (2016: 122) attributes this to the class difference since Nicaraguan emigrants belong since the 1980s to the (upper) middle class.

where mainly men work. These jobs are no longer attractive for young Costa Ricans and the majority is done by Nicaraguans (Castro 2010).

Consequently, migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica is not a temporarily limited phenomenon but a prolonged historical development. In the province of Guanacaste – a border region between the two countries – thousands of Nicaraguans often live and work in the second or third generation and international families are rather the rule than the exception (Castro 2010: 39).

Still, the Nicaraguans are defined as ‘the others’ in Costa Rican society. This does not mean that they are discriminated *per se*. When it comes to differences in the Spanish language in fact there are local linguistic variations (Sandoval-García 2006: 109).<sup>2</sup> Even the question between the *Nicas* and the *Ticos* about who created the national dish *gallo pinto* (rice with beans) remains a controversial, but humoristic issue, as both sides claim the creation for themselves (Gutiérrez Silva 1964; Ruiz Herrero 1964). However, apart from this rather harmless popular culture example that occur often between neighbouring countries, stereotypical visions and interpretations about Nicaraguans remain evident in Costa Rican society. Most evident are references such as the ‘darker’ skin colour of the *Nicas* or that they are ‘uncivilized’ and generally more involved in crime, in comparison to the *Ticos*. These attributions are not new, but rather exist since the 1940s, as historian Patricia Alvarenga has shown (2011: 17). For the upcoming analysis this is crucial because it will show that these discriminatory and xenophobic discourses are used in various social media groups since the outbreak of the political crisis in Nicaragua and the most recent migration movement since April 2018.

### **The political crisis of April 2018 in Nicaragua and the migration movement into Costa Rica**

Two events led to the biggest protests in recent Nicaraguan history and against the government under President Daniel Ortega of the FSLN. In March 2018, a forest fire broke out in the *Indio Maíz Biological Reserve* which for a long time could not be brought under control by the local authorities. Environmentalists spoke about intentional passivity from the government, in order to obtain land for the agro-industry. Just a month later the government announced reforms regarding the social security system without conducting a prior parliamentary discussion and evaluation.<sup>3</sup> This led to protests against the government in the capital Managua and in other parts of the country. These two events can be seen

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2 Nevertheless, Sarceño (2017) points at the dialectics and inherent power relations when it comes to language also between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans.

3 The reforms, demanded also by the International Monetary Fund, included among other things a reduction of the pensions by 5% and an increase in social security fees. See: Munguía Argeñal (2018).

as a kind of catalyst for the growing dissatisfaction with the government under President Ortega since he took office in 2007. The increasing corruption in the state's institutions, the steady dismantling of democratic structures, as well as the growing nepotism of the FSLN were central motivations for the discontent of many Nicaraguans, especially the young generation. An expression of the concentration of power was the appointment of Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice-president after the 2017 elections, which many, including many former FSLN members, interpreted as a return to a family dictatorship *a la* Somoza (Álvaro Navarro 2016).

As the protest evolved during March and April 2018, the security forces reacted increasingly violent. In the following weeks more than 300 people lost their lives and more than 2.000 were injured in confrontations with security forces as well as paramilitary groups. Also, hundreds of protesters were arrested, particularly young people and students, but also journalists and human rights activists. The situation worsened between July and August 2018 and thousands of Nicaraguans fled to avoid persecution and apply for asylum. The statistics of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show the destination countries of Nicaraguans: almost 90 percent applied for asylum in Costa Rica, followed by Panama and the United States and the peak of the migration movement was between June and August 2018 (UNHCR 2018: table 1 & 2). Since then, Nicaraguans make up to 80% of the total number of people seeking refuge in Costa Rica and as of December 2020, around 368,000 Nicaraguan regular immigrants and refugees lived in Costa Rica, making them the largest group in terms of Costa Rica's immigration population (Chaves-González & Mora 2021: 7, 11).

### **Analysis of the group *Recuperemos Costa Rica***

As already mentioned, the Costa Rican society largely showed their solidarity with the Nicaraguan refugees and welcomed their 'Nicaraguan brothers' and sisters (ElPaís.cr 2018).<sup>4</sup> However, a demonstration on 18 August 2018 at the *Parque de la Merced* in the capital San José showed a different picture. Around 500 people gathered that Saturday to protest against the Nicaraguan refugees coming to Costa Rica. It is not clear who organized the protests, but independent journalists reported that members of violent football fan clubs (*barras*) and in some cases individuals associated to the criminal scene were seen as lead figures during the manifestations (CRHoy.com 2018). Statements such as '*Fuera nicas*' ('Nicaraguans out') or '*Fuera Alvarado*' were heard. The later was directed at the Costa Rican president, Carlos Alvarado of the centre left *Partido Acción Ciudadana*. After the protest, Alvarado made a public statement in which he emphasized that he understood the concerns of many Costa Ricans, but also spoke about the

4 All translations from Spanish into English are made by the author.

long history of migration movements into Costa Rica, highlighting its positive effects on the country. However, he also implied that if one of the refugees did not comply with national laws or posed a threat to the security of the country, he/she would be refused to enter the country or even be deported (Trinchera de la Noticia TV 2018).

Most of the groups engaging in actions against migrations were formed between July and August 2018 and included *Costa Rica en Desarrollo*, *CR Revoluciones*, *Salvemos Costa Rica*, *Resistencia Costarricense*, *Denuncias Costa Rica*, *Liberales Costa Rica*, *Movimiento Nacionalista Costarricense*, *Periódico Juanito Mora*, *Noticias Nacionales CR* or *MNC San José* and *Recuperemos Costa Rica* (Chinchilla 2019). The outreach of these groups grew since mid-2018 substantially, reaching up to 160.000 followers only on Facebook, according to investigative journalists of the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación* (Robles 2019).

It is noteworthy to mention some details about the meeting spot the demonstration took place. The Parque de la Merced has been associated with Nicaraguans since the 1980s. There, individuals, or groups of *Nicas* would celebrate *La Purissima*, a popular festival to honour the Virgen Mary (Equipo Envío 1981). The park has since developed into a meeting place for Nicaraguan migrants, to share information, to look out for jobs or to engage in small-scale economic activities, like selling traditional Nicaraguan street-food (The Tico Times 2018). Thus, organizing anti-refugee protests at the park can be interpreted a sign to reconquer a public space, as the name *Recuperemos Costa Rica* already points at. The social practice of occupying the public space, reshaping it and change the socio-urban landscape, has been a common feature of recent social movements across the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

The group had been active on Twitter as well as on Facebook, where it had reached up to 5.000 subscribers in September 2019. Their ideology can be described as neo-nationalist and ‘populist radical right’. According to Van Dijk ideology is a ‘belief system’ which is ‘socially shared’, ‘controls society’ and its individuals to a certain point. The coherence is an essential part in it because it elaborates a sense of belonging to a group. This can be established via a set of common values, ideas or opinions which are central for the group’s coherence (Van Dijk 2009: 116-117). Within this context groups which appear to occupy extreme ideological position in society often adopt a practice of social inclusion. Cas Mudde for example has defined the populist radical right as movements which also radicalize the political mainstream and mobilizes members not only at the far right (or left) ideological specters of society (Mudde 2019). Dominant features include ‘nativism, a combination of nationalism and xenophobia’ as Mudde mentions.

5 Having in mind *Occupy Wall Street* or the *Black Lives Matter* movement (see: Belli, & López Raventós 2021: 66-68).

For *Recuperemos Costa Rica* these definitions become visible, looking at a text published on Facebook on 27 August 2018 called *La Patria Primero* (The homeland first) the group defined itself as ‘Movement against the impending destruction of the homeland, our values and the people’. Their vision was a society of ‘national solidarity’, ‘love for our country’, ‘the family as its core’, ‘self-respect’, and ‘individual freedom’ (Recuperemos Costa Rica 2019). The first notion of this text is that the migration movement is interpreted as a moment of crisis for the Costa Rican society. The text implies an imminent threat caused by Nicaraguans referring to the ‘destruction of the homeland’ together with images of migrants at the border with police forces. The combination of these type of texts together with pictures creates fear and the migration itself becomes a moment of crisis and danger for the Costa Rican population. This leads on a discursive level to the image of Nicaraguans are to blame for causing the crisis. This is then turned into the national framework, e.g., Nicaraguans endanger Costa Rica as a nation. Referring to the ‘homeland’ and the ‘country’ points at this neo-nationalist ideology of the group.

In general, security as topic play an important part in the discourses of the group. As Mudde states, security is central for right-wing movements and agents across the world. Their ‘obsession’ derives from the fact that the issue emotionalizes and individuals as well as collectives are concerned with their own security (Mudde 2019: 30). In order to better understand the symbolic world view of the group some considerations of Ulrich Beck can help. Already at the end of the 1980s, he spoke of the so-called ‘risk society’ which he later renamed a ‘world risk society’, emphasizing its globality. According to Beck, globalization means that fear is a central part of nationalist thinking and actions. This fears a manifold: there can be an economic fear (a stock market crash), an ecological (tsunami or volcanic eruption) or a social one (losing a job). The overall feeling is, that we live in a time with too many risks (economic, ecological, political, technological, etc.) at once, on which we as individuals have no longer control, since they are global and transcend the national. Therefore, neo-nationalist groups assume it would be better to reduce the state, its people, the economy and other aspects of our societies back to the national framework (Beck 1992, 2007).

In relation to Costa Rica, *Recuperemos Costa Rica*, for example, interpreted the Costa Rican population as being at risk from various sides: from outside, e.g., from migrants but also from capitalism and globalization as well as from inside, referring to local elites (politicians) who – in their interpretation – are mere agents of globalization and capitalism. There is also the fear from ‘forces’ from below, migrants or/and minorities. This is emphasized in a second text (*Nuestra Lucha*) where globalization is seen as a danger together with other ‘extreme forms of control’ like Marxism and Capitalism. The Costa Rican citizens are thus

interpreted by *Recuperemos Costa Rica* as a disadvantaged and threatened collective which also goes hand in hand with the loss of their own identity.

Also, Andre Gingrich and Marcus Banks mentioned something similar about neo-nationalist groups. They argue that neo-nationalist groups struggle for an independent nation state within globalization, while in contrast to 'traditional nationalism', neo-nationalist movements and agents reject influences from outside and above – in their interpretation traditional liberal or conservative politics – and emphasize the local identity of a community.

Thus, these groups and agents not only address their messages to traditional right-wing and conservative sections of the society, but also to the political centre that – in their interpretation – is dissatisfied with and dependent on globalization, which has only negative consequences for them. Often, they reject classifications into the political right and left and define themselves as anti-systemic, whereby the liberal-democratic system is considered outdated (Gingrich & Banks 2006). There is no data available of the specific ideological composition of the group, but it appeared to be diverse in its composition. Referring to what Simone Belli and Cristian López Raventós (2021) write that such 'movements are heterogeneous but share some features such as the rejection of the foreign-born population, referring to the dangers of immigration; and criticizing traditional political parties, corrupt elites and the impossibility of improving the living conditions of the population' seems correct also in the case of *Recuperemos Costa Rica*. Their affinity for ideas to address the political centre can be seen by one of their guiding principles: 'Social justice for all without distinction of social classes and necessary property for all' (*Justicia social para todos sin distinción de clases sociales y propiedad necesaria para todos*). However, this refers again to the national framework (*solidaridad nacional*) and thus excludes other nationalities, ethnic minorities as well as migrants. The *todos* (all) is therefore reduced to 'some' who have the 'correct' nationality or/and ethnicity.

Here, the question arises where the limitations between the imaginary 'us' and 'them' are drawn. This always requires a definition of the identity of Costa Ricans, assuming that all identity is imagined and socially constructed. Postings on *Facebook* provide information for this. The group mentioned that 'anti-fascist' and 'leftist' people are not considered as Costa Ricans. These are described as 'traitors to the fatherland' (*traidores de la patria*), as well as the politicians who are committed to the concerns of immigrants and intend to help them.

One of the predominant associations which is used in the groups postings was that Nicaraguans are criminals. Media reports on crime, such as rape, theft, domestic or public violence, drug trafficking, and illegal work activities were posted and shared extensively. Attributions such as 'criminals' (*delinquentes*) or 'illegal migrants' (*inmigrante ilegal*) dominate the postings. Therefore, a Costa

Rican is all but not these affirmations. Based on reports of violence or crimes committed by individuals, the group exaggerates on a discursive level, creating the image of Nicaraguans (as a collective) as *per se* criminal. As already mentioned above, this is a historically reproduced image of ‘uncivilized’ and ‘criminal’ Nicaraguans, reactivated in a time of crisis. The Costa Ricans, according to the interpretation of *Recuperemos Costa Rica*, are portrayed as ‘victims’ of Nicaraguans who are illegally in the country. Particular attention is drawn to the fact that they take the jobs away from the Costa Ricans, especially in the construction industry. The hashtag *#CostaRicaPrimero*, based on the slogan *America First* by former US-President Donald Trump, is used in connection with the alleged disadvantage of Costa Ricans against compared with migrants. *Recuperemos Costa Rica* thus implies in the postings that the government in San José cares more about the Nicaraguans than the unemployed Costa Ricans and that it lets them down. It also implies that members of *Recuperemos Costa Rica* perceived themselves as the ‘real’ Costa Ricans.

Another significant aspect of neo-nationalist groups and agents is their revisionist interpretation of history. In the case of *Recuperemos Costa Rica* the group uses symbolism which can be seen within this context. The groups symbol was a hand holding a torch on a blue, white, and red basis (see figure 1), symbolizing the Costa Rican flag. On the one side it can be interpreted and associated with the history of Juan Santamaría (1831-1856). For his action during the war against William Walkers filibusters (1854-1857) Santamaría – a young soldier and drummer in the Costa Rican army – set a *Hazienda* on fire where the US-American filibusters had barricaded themselves. This not only caused the Costa Rican victory in the Battle of Rivas, but also the death of Santamaría who became a national hero of Costa Rica and nationalist historiography (Acuña Ortega 2014: 87-98).

On the other side a graphic posted on 4 September 2018, by the group can be clearly assigned to the right spectrum.<sup>6</sup> The picture shows a stature of a man holding a flag created by the German sculptor Arno Breker (1900-1991) and the logo of the group in the right corner (figure 2). Breker remains an extremely controversial and problematic figure for his (artistic) work during the National Socialist regime, being part of contributing to the NS-aesthetics in the arts.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the current migration movements in Central America are of transnational character; whether it is the ongoing violence, the overall economic situation or also recently the climate change (Ferris 2020), the movement of Central Americans from one country to another will continue. Of course, in detail the Central American countries face different situations: data collected

6 Screenshot, <https://www.facebook.com/CostaRicaRecuperemos/photos/a.545847212504335/546665212422535/?type=3&theater> (accessed on 26.08.2019).

by the UNHCR shows for example that Costa Rica was the country with the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers in 2018, followed by Panama. Honduras, on the other hand, as the northern neighbour of Nicaragua, officially accepted (officially) only 80 refugees and asylum seekers in 2018 but had the largest number of internally displaced people in the entire Central American region (UNHCR 2019).

Migration emotionalizes and mobilizes people, even though is not a new phenomenon of the present century. As shown in the case of Costa Rica, the long history of Nicaraguans coming to its neighbouring country, is still marked by a nationalist and xenophobic discursive framework, although the self-image and outside perception of Costa Rica relates to its democratic tradition. But in times of crisis, these sentiments can reappear, and seemingly old hostilities revived. The border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua would be another current example in the context of the late migration movements where long lasting struggles over rescues and control of territory still play a part in the policies and discourses about sovereignty, security and of course immigration of the two countries (Vega García & Gómez 2012). Therefore, the protests in 2018 against Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica can be seen as a decisive moment in which xenophobic groups and activists appeared on a much broader public scene as well as a further mobilization especially on social media platforms. As shown, the historically based stereotypes against Nicaraguans ('uncivilized', 'criminal') that Alvarenga has addressed have been used in public discourse, in this case on Social Media channels.

Taking a global perspective on the issue of anti-migration movements the Costa Rican case is not an isolated phenomenon. Having in mind Europe where right-wing populist parties and agents in the last decade have been part of government coalitions, like the *Legha Nord* in Italy. Their unconventional methods of attracting attention have been successful and in the case of Costa Rica xenophobic and racist ideas from *Recuperemos Costa Rica* could in the future resonate within a wider social discourse. Particularly in the current debates on the migration issue in Central America, neo-nationalist and right-wing movements and agents already find a wider audience than a decade before. Therefore, emotionalized debates are placed in an appropriate historical moment, for example, during a political, economic crisis or in times of global pandemics, as even a health crisis can trigger an anti-migrant effect on the population. Though this article has concentrated on xenophobic sentiments against Nicaraguan migration, the multiplicity of migration profiles, from ethnicity or nationality to economic aspects, could resonate in similar actions and sentiments against other groups and indicates coming to Costa Rica. Researchers of the *Migration Policy Institute* recently stated that Cost Rican policy makers 'need to guide and even changer the

public debate on migration by highlighting its potential long-term benefits' as well as 'recognize the real tensions and challenges involved in effective migration and integration management'. In their interpretation this will 'be important to avoid fanning the flames of xenophobia by appearing to give immigrants special treatment or opportunities that are not available to the native population' (Chaves-González & Mora 2021: 44).



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