

Depoliticization through partnership in the field of migration: the Mexico–US case¹

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ABSTRACT

A buzzword in today's world, the notion of partnership is used in many different policy areas and has also entered the field of migration. This paper analyses the partnership discourse that has emerged in the nineteen-nineties in the context of cooperation between Mexico and the US on migration issues and analyses its institutional elements and broader implications. The main argument is that the partnership discourse contributed to reframe migration governance as a technical issue and thereby to depoliticize migration cooperation in the Mexico–US context. The implications of this depoliticization process are varied: they have allowed for dialogue and cooperation on specific (technical) issues between the two countries, they have led to responsabilizing Mexico for the management of migration, marginalizing certain actors and turning migration management into an integral component of 'good governance'.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of partnership has become a buzzword in today's world. It is used in many different contexts, both at the national and international level, and between different partners, such as governments, international organizations and private and civil society actors – illustrated by the NATO Partnership for Peace Program, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Economic Partnership Agreements between the European Union and African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, or the trilateral Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). Particularly in the field of development, the partnership concept has come to be used prominently to describe new forms of North–South and aid relations (Abrahamsen 2004, Fowler 2002, Maxwell and Riddell 1998, Ruckert 2006). While the use of the partnership notion in the field of development can be traced back as far as 1969, when the Pearson Commission on Aid and Development called for 'a new partnership based on an informal understanding expressing the reciprocal rights and obligations of donors and recipients' (Commission on Aid and Development 1969: 127), it was only in the mid-nineteen-nineties that the term became more prominently used, such as in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-Operation* (May 1996) or the UK Department for International Development (DfID) White Paper *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century* (1997). Generally speaking, the notion of partnership

has positive connotations and is associated with a desirable, voluntary, inherently positive form of cooperation among equals, pursuing common goals based on mutual respect (Laakso 2007:118). In the field of development, the move from the conditionality of Structural Adjustment Policies towards a partnership approach within the Post-Washington Consensus has been said to empower developing countries and to foster participation and ownership of their development agenda (Ruckert 2006:36). Thus, for example, the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD calls for partnership as a central aspect of its strategy for the twenty-first century: 'In a true partnership, local actors should progressively take the lead, while external partners back their efforts to assume greater responsibility for their own development' (OECD 1996:13 quoted in Harrison 2002:590).

More recently, the concept of partnership has also entered the field of migration policy, particularly in the form of 'migration partnerships'. In the international realm, the notion of migration partnership is the most recent turn in the search for new migration policy solutions and has emerged as a panacea for the cooperative governance of international migration between receiving, sending and transit countries. Promoted by the work of the Berne Initiative, the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), the UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), this notion has seen a rapid diffusion in policy discourse. Thus, for example, the *International Agenda for Migration Management* issued by the Berne Initiative states: 'Migration management is an area for partnerships between interested stakeholders and for consideration of responsibility sharing between States involved in or affected by particular migratory movements' (Berne Initiative 2004:13). Underlying migration partnerships is what I call a 'partnership discourse' that promises to address migration in a spirit of cooperation between all affected countries, based on a belief in win-win approaches to international migration, and the notion of shared responsibility for migration management.²

The scarce analytical literature that exists on partnership in the field of migration has so far mainly focused on the European context. The literature on EU mobility partnerships centres around assessing whether they are successful in terms of providing additional leverage for the EU vis-à-vis third states in meeting broader EU objectives (Chou 2009); or providing a comprehensive approach and controlling illegal immigration (Parkes 2009). It has examined the impact of EU mobility partnerships on relations between the EU and Africa, whether they represent a move away from a unilateral and control-oriented approach to migration (Van Criekinge 2008), and whether these partnerships have managed to integrate development goals to replace the prominent security-oriented lens (Cassarino 2009). In addition, existing studies have also assessed the consequences of EU mobility partnerships for the coherence of EU labour immigration policy and third country workers' human rights in Europe (Carrera and Hernández i Sagrera forthcoming). However, the broader implications of the partnership discourse in the field of migration in and beyond Europe have so far not been analysed.

This paper argues that the ‘partnership discourse’ also plays a role in framing migration governance in the Mexico–US context. In this context, the partnership discourse emerged in the nineteen-nineties after decades of a ‘policy of no policy’ on migration between the two countries, during which migration issues were seen as too political and sensitive to be addressed and were treated as a taboo in the bilateral relationship. This was partly because both countries believed that non-regulation was in their best interest, but also because they had conflicting understandings of the migration issue: Mexico insisted that migration was a natural phenomenon beyond regulation, whereas the US deplored the unwillingness of Mexico to keep its nationals from leaving the country. With the emergence of the partnership discourse and several bilateral institutions starting in the nineteen-nineties, the reframing of migration led to specific forms of migration cooperation.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the partnership discourse in the Mexico–US context in terms of its implications for the framing of migration, and in terms of its broader consequences. Thus, I trace the emergence and development of the partnership discourse in the Mexico–US context, and reveal the different institutional elements and key underlying assumptions that constitute this discourse. My main argument is that the partnership discourse has contributed to reframe migration governance as a technical issue and thereby to depoliticize migration cooperation in the Mexico–US context. The implications of this depoliticization process are manifold: it has allowed a taboo to be overcome and led to the establishment of dialogue and cooperation on specific (technical) issues between the two countries, yet, it has also resulted in responsabilizing Mexico to manage its migration, marginalizing certain actors and turning migration management into an integral component of good governance.

You might object to this argument, saying that there are few issues that are less politicized than Mexico–US migration. Indeed, there is a rich literature on the politicized nature of Mexico–US migration in border states and beyond. Yet, this paper does not focus on these public discourses, but analyses the discourse on the regulation of migration issues, focusing on the official government discourses and the partnership notion that emerged in the nineteen-nineties. An analysis of the peculiar co-existence of a highly politicized public discourse on migration with instances of depoliticization of migration regulation goes beyond the scope of this paper.

After outlining the analytical framework used in this paper in the following section, section three provides a short historical background on Mexico–US relations on migration, section four analyses the ingredients of the partnership discourse and how they contribute to depoliticization, and section five maps a number of key institutions and practices that have contributed to establish and diffuse the partnership discourse and depoliticization. The concluding section explores some consequences of the depoliticization effect of partnerships.

The findings of this paper are based on the analysis of official policy documents, speeches and other reference material produced by the relevant political actors,³ combined with semi-structured interviews carried out in 2010 with US and Mexican government officials, International Organizations and NGO representatives and experts in the migration field.⁴ The analysis focuses mainly on Mexico–US relations, although I make some references to the broader regional context of North and Central America which suggest that the partnership discourse might be relevant beyond bilateral Mexico–US relations. The present paper has one key limitation: given its focus on governmental discourses, it neglects non-state actors' involvement in Mexico–US relations on migration, which is an important element, but would require further research.

2. THE PERFORMATIVE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

Most analyses of the role of partnerships in bilateral and international governance can be found in the field of development. This paper draws on insights from the literature on development partnerships and explores a number of analogies that might be drawn for the field of migration. The literature on development partnerships has tended to concentrate on the question whether these partnerships are 'genuine' and represent a real shift towards a more cooperative approach or are mere rhetoric; and whether they have contributed to a shift in power towards developing countries (Crawford 2003, Fowler 2002, Lister 2003, Maxwell and Riddell 1998). Based on Abrahamsen (2004), we can identify three approaches to the study of the role of partnerships in the field of development. The first perspective sees development partnerships as a positive initiative that contributes to return power to developing countries and to increase ownership and participation (Abrahamsen 2004:1455). According to the second perspective, development partnerships are mere rhetoric or ideology, a myth that serves to disguise 'continued domination of the South by the North', without transforming development relationships (Abrahamsen 2004:1456). Harrison (2002:587) warns that such partnerships might not only conceal but could also reproduce and legitimize this continued domination.

These two perspectives are characterized by an analysis of power as domination over others, and power as ideology (Abrahamsen 2004:1459). This paper adopts a different approach, focusing on the performative power of partnerships, analysing them as a form of governance and power. According to Abrahamsen, 'development partnerships can be regarded as a form of advanced liberal rule that increasingly govern through the explicit commitment to the self-government and agency of recipient states' (Abrahamson 2004:1453). Thereby, the focus lies on the ways in which a partnership approach transforms cooperation and what the power and governance implications are. This paper uses such an analysis to study the role of partnerships in the field of migration cooperation in the case of bilateral relations between Mexico and the US. Thereby, the aim is not to find out whether the partnership discourse has led to 'real' partnerships, but rather to analyse the

principles upon which this partnership discourse is based in a specific context, and to examine its performative power to influence the framing and forms of governance of migration.

One implication of the performative power of partnerships prominently mentioned in the development literature on partnerships is 'depoliticization'. Fowler, for example, argues that the partnership approach tends to 'remove politics from development discourse and practice' and it 'de-politicises social decision making and social policy formulation and how you understand why poverty and inequality exists' (2002:37). This paper seeks to analyse whether and in what ways the partnership discourse within the field of migration in the US-Mexico context has depoliticization implications.

There is a rich and diverse literature on the process of 'depoliticization' and its implications, and depoliticization trends have been diagnosed in several policy fields (see Barry 2002, Ferguson 1994, Hay 2007, Harriss 2002).⁵ For the purpose of this paper, I define depoliticization as a process whereby an issue is removed from political debate and public contestation. Thus, this process turns political issues into technical matters subject to administration. Thereby, the issue in question is moved from the domain of politicians and the public towards the domain of bureaucrats. Depoliticization is itself a deeply political act, and the depoliticization of an issue is fragile and subject to re-politicization.

Mechanisms of depoliticization have been analysed in a number of policy fields. In the field of development, Ferguson (1994) has argued that development interventions in Lesotho contribute to depoliticization through 'technicalization'. Drawing on Foucault's insights on the modern prison system's performative effects in producing delinquent individuals as part of a technique to exert social control, Ferguson examines the unintended outcomes of development interventions in Lesotho (Ferguson 1994:256). He argues that they resulted in the expansion of bureaucratic state power and a depoliticization of poverty and the state through the establishment of an 'anti-politics machine'. This machine, composed of a conceptual and institutional apparatus, turned political issues into technical problems:

[t]he conceptual apparatus systematically translated all the ills and ailments of the country into simple, technical problems and thus constituted a suitable object for the apolitical, technical, 'development' intervention which 'development' agencies are in the business of making. [...] First, technical problems such as isolation, lack of markets, lack of credit, unfamiliarity with a cash economy, lack of education, lack of fertilizer, lack of tractors, lack of purebred livestock, lack of farmers' associations and cooperatives, and lack of appropriate energy technology are exaggerated or invented to take the place of things like unemployment, low wages, influx control, political subjugation by South Africa, and entrenched bureaucratic elites; then an institutional

apparatus is unleashed to combat these largely illusory technical problems.
(Ferguson 1994:87–8)

Drawing on the work of Ferguson, Harriss (2002) argues that the way the idea of social capital has become framed by the World Bank has served to depoliticize development by ‘occluding the recognition of power and class relations’ (Harriss 2002:112). In the field of environmental governance, Barry (2002) analyses ‘technicalization’ as a mechanism of depoliticization. He demonstrates how ‘metrological regimes’, such as the requirement for cars to undergo regular emissions tests, have anti-political effects in that they translate the political debate about air pollution by cars into a technical matter of emissions testing (Barry 2002:272–3). Yet, as opposed to Ferguson (1994) and Harriss (2002) who perceive the depoliticization of development as a problematic issue, Barry argues that depoliticization can have both positive and negative effects. Thus, in his understanding, politics is also about ‘placing limits on the political’, for example by limiting continued discussions about air pollution (Barry 2002:270):

[L]egislation and technical regulation have the effects of placing actions and objects (provisionally) outside the realm of public contestation, thereby regularizing the conduct of economic and social life, with both beneficial and negative consequences.
(Barry 2002:271)

Depoliticization tendencies have also been diagnosed in the field of migration. Drawing on the work of Barry in his analysis of the implications of maps of ‘illegal immigration’, Walters (2010:116) argues that such maps ‘play a significant role in limiting, containing and sometimes suppressing public and political perceptions of the economic’, and thereby contribute to the phenomenon of ‘anti-political economy’. He illustrates how such maps can act to depoliticize in two ways: through ‘translating political controversies into technical objectives’ and through ‘non-identification’, i.e. through the strategic omission of certain elements pertaining to an issue (Walters 2010:116).

In sum, depoliticization, can happen in a variety of policy fields and through various mechanisms, such as ‘technicalization’, ‘anti-political economy’, or through the strategic use of a truncated version of the ‘social’. Drawing on these insights, this paper examines whether the partnership discourse and its institutional elements in the field of migration cooperation between Mexico and the US, have similar effects of depoliticization, through which mechanisms depoliticization happens, and what the implications might be. As noted above, depoliticization is enacted through a combination of discursive and institutional elements, hence the analysis in this paper first examines the discursive and then the institutional factors that contribute to depoliticize migration regulation. However, before turning to this analysis, the following section provides a short historical background.

3. MEXICO–US MIGRATION AND MIGRATION POLICY

Mexico and the United States have a long history of non-cooperation on migration (Rosenblum 2007). For most of the twentieth century, despite a few brief periods of bilateral cooperation, the two countries practised what has been called a 'policy of no policy', 'bargained negligence', or 'deliberate non-engagement' on migration issues (Domínguez and Fernandez de Castro 2001:12). Thereby, growing undocumented Mexican migration flows to the US were a taboo, and both states considered the *laissez-faire* policy to be the most beneficial. The literature mentions several factors that explain this lack of cooperation on migration, both internal and international, including the founding mythology in Mexico that 'emphasizes economic nationalism and independence from the United States' (Rosenblum 2007); the understanding in Mexico that migration is a 'natural phenomenon of structural interdependence with a growing capitalist US economy (Ronfeldt 1978); Mexican distrust of its neighbour dating back to the Mexican-American war in 1846-1848, in which Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States; Mexico's debt crisis; US militarism in Central America; and the conflict over the US war on drugs (Rosenblum 2006:99). Hence, for a long time, migration was a taboo in bilateral relations and the two countries did not agree on a common understanding of the issue.

The turning point in Mexico-US relations occurred from the nineteen-nineties onwards, with the simultaneous inauguration of President Carlos Salinas (December 1988) and George Bush (January 1989), which provided a chance for a fresh start. The gradual *échauffement* in relations between the two countries mainly focused on negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which concluded with the signing of the trade agreement in 1992 and its entry into force in 1994. The increased cooperation in the context of these negotiations was accompanied by a bilateral dialogue on migration, such as within the Working Group on Migration and Consular Affairs of the Binational Commission (BNC) (see below). This dialogue continued during the subsequent administrations. On the occasion of President Bill Clinton's visit to Mexico in 1997, he and President Ernesto Zedillo issued a Joint Statement on Migration, affirming their 'commitment to enhance bilateral cooperation in the management of migration' (President Clinton and President Zedillo, 6 May 1997).

The year 2001 marked a historical moment in the migration cooperation between Mexico and the US, also called the 'migration honeymoon' period.⁶ Being elected simultaneously, President George W. Bush and President Vicente Fox engaged in a series of bilateral talks, emphasizing their personal friendship and the special relationship between Mexico and the US, based on their shared border, history, culture and values (Bush Administration 4 September 2001a). Within a year of taking office, the two presidents had met five times, agreed on a number of common principles, and had laid the foundation stones for a comprehensive bilateral agreement on migration cooperation that aimed at resolving long-standing issues between the two countries, based on 'shared responsibility' for orderly migration flows (Rosenblum 2007). This agreement was supposed to include cooperation in

the areas of earned legalization of undocumented Mexican migrants living in the US, a temporary worker programme, increased family reunification and border cooperation, and development initiatives for Mexican regions of emigration.

Yet, with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11), the bilateral migration dialogue was put on ice, and the US turned its attention to homeland security issues, the invasion of Afghanistan and the 'war on terror' (Rosenblum 2006:92). Mexico's 'lukewarm reactions to the 2001 attacks' (Fernández de Castro and Clariond Rangel 2008:148), and its refusal to support the US position on the issue of the Iraq invasion in the United Nations Security Council negatively affected bilateral relations. The two presidents did not meet until the Monterrey Summit in March 2002, where the Fox administration expected bilateral migration talks to resume, but the Bush administration imposed its own security agenda, which led to the signing of the Border Partnership Agreement (Fernández de Castro and Clariond Rangel 2008:148). A similar border agreement had been signed on 12 December 2001 with Canada (Office of Homeland Security 12 December 2001).

It was only in January 2004, when President Bush announced his principles for immigration reform during his re-election campaign that the migration issue came back onto the agenda (Fernández de Castro and Clariond Rangel 2008:149). Bush's proposal consisted of four elements: a new temporary worker programme; an increase in immigrant visas; economic incentives for temporary workers to return home – a key novelty; and workplace and immigration law enforcement (ibid:151). This proposal aimed at re-establishing the circularity of migration, which had been affected negatively by US border policies in the nineteen-nineties that had the effect of 'locking people in', instead of deterring them from coming in the first place (ibid:152). The following years were dominated by heated debates and several unsuccessful attempts at comprehensive immigration reform in the US Congress during the 2005, 2006 and 2007 legislatures (ibid:163ff).⁷ What became clear, however, was that the *migration* issue, seen as a bilateral issue during the 'honeymoon period', had again become framed as a unilateral issue of *immigration*, putting an end to the period of high-level bilateral talks and shifting the policy emphasis towards unilateral US immigration reform.

After the inauguration of President Felipe Calderón in December 2006, the Mexican position on migration shifted towards focusing on security issues and job creation in Mexico, and the Calderón administration made its top priority the fight against organized crime (Seele 2007:11). In 2007, President Calderón approached the United States with a proposal for a joint effort to cooperate in the fight against drug trafficking (Schaefer, Bahnney and Riley 2009:7–8). The United States supported Calderón's proposal, and Congress and the Bush administration finalized the Mérida Initiative, an assistance package that provides aid to Mexico, primarily for technical assistance and equipment to combat drug trafficking (ibid:8).

With the election of Barack Obama, hopes for a comprehensive immigration reform in the US were renewed. During their election campaign, Senators Obama and Biden

affirmed that they would push for a comprehensive immigration reform by ‘offering a complete solution that secures our border, enforces our laws and reaffirms our heritage as a nation of immigrants’ (Obama and Biden 2008) and vowed that they would ‘repair the strained relationship with our southern neighbour’ (Obama 20 February 2008). After being elected, President Obama started working on this promise straight away: a week before his inauguration, on 12 January 2009, President-elect Obama met President Calderón to discuss economic and security issues, the increase in drug-related violence near the border, and supposedly also the revival of US immigration reform (The Economist 13 January 2009). In April 2009, President Obama made his first trip to Mexico and his first to Latin America (Office of the Press Secretary 16 April 2009). However, it remains to be seen whether a bilateral agreement and unilateral immigration reform in the US will happen in the near future, given the current economic crisis.

4. THE DEPOLITICIZATION EFFECTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP DISCOURSE

The notion of partnership is used in various ways in the discourse on migration cooperation between Mexico and the US. It emerged in the nineteen-nineties in the context of the NAFTA negotiations, whereby Mexico and the US became ‘trade partners’ and Mexico was declared a partner of the US in the ‘war on drugs’ (New York Times 26 February 1997). Over time, the notion of partnership gradually became used as a term to describe the general relationship between the two countries, or to refer to cooperation in specific policy areas, such as migration, border, security or prosperity. The analysis in this paper uses the term ‘partnership discourse’ as referring to not only to the explicit use of the partnership term but also to implicit references to a spirit of cooperation, evoking underlying assumptions that this discourse is based on, such as ‘shared responsibility’, ‘common interests’, ‘mutual benefits’, and ‘mutual trust’. As the analysis shows, even though the partnership discourse is not homogenous and has changed over the years,⁸ these underlying assumptions link the different forms of partnership discourse and represent a shift in the broader cooperation frame between the two countries. This section traces the emergence and evolution of this discourse and analyses its depoliticization effects.

One of the earlier testimonies of the partnership discourse can be found in the speech made by US Secretary of State Warren Christopher to the closing plenary session of the BNC Meeting in May 1994 in Mexico City:

Our talks were positive and constructive. The United States and Mexico are friends, neighbours, and partners in an increasingly important and dynamic relationship.

(US Department of State May 1994)

This initial period of bilateral dialogue between Mexico and the US on migration issues during the nineteen-nineties was hailed as a ‘new spirit of cooperation’ between the two countries (Binational Study on Migration 1997:4). In 1997,

President Zedillo and President Clinton signed a Joint Statement on Migration, emphasizing:

The issue of migration of Mexican nationals to the United States is a priority on our bilateral agenda. We, the Presidents of Mexico and the United States, hereby politically commit our respective governments to strive to ensure a *proper and respectful management* of this complex phenomenon taking into consideration its diverse causes and economic and social consequences in both countries. During the last two years, our governments have engaged in consultations and exchange of information through many mechanisms and have produced significant progress in the bilateral treatment of issues such as the human rights and consular protection of migrants and efforts to combat *migrant trafficking*. *This constructive dialogue should serve as a first step* leading to specific proposals to *manage migration between our nations in a mutually beneficial manner*.

(President Clinton and President Zedillo 6 May 1997) [My emphasis]

The Progress Report on the Commitments of the Joint Presidential Statement on Migration of 1998 recalled these principles of bilateral cooperation on migration and re-emphasized the ‘will to extend cooperation beyond border activities and to explore a longer-term framework for *managing migration*’ (Progress Report 10–11 June 1998) [My emphasis].

In the initial period of the Fox–Bush relationship in 2001, the partnership terminology appears extensively in official documents, referring to the personal relationship between the two presidents, as well as the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The understanding of partnership is based on dialogue between ‘equals’, and the establishment of common principles and objectives. Thereby, the personal friendship between the two presidents is seen as the basis for such a ‘full, mature, and equitable partnership for prosperity’ (President Bush and President Fox 16 February 2001a). Thus, President Bush affirmed in 2001:

Our nations are bound together by ties of history, family, values, commerce and culture. Today, these ties give us an unprecedented opportunity. We have a chance to *build a partnership* that will improve the lives of citizens in both countries. [...] Geography has made us neighbors; *cooperation and respect will make us partners*. And the *promise of the partnership* was renewed and reinvigorated today.

(President Bush and President Fox 16 February 2001b) [My emphasis]

The above quotes illustrate the key features of the partnership discourse. First, the emphasis is on political will and mutual benefits, which represents a reframing of migration from a taboo between the two countries towards an issue that can be

addressed bilaterally through win-win solutions. A second feature is the reframing of migration from something that either needs to be prevented (from the US perspective) or a natural phenomenon that cannot be regulated (from the Mexican perspective), towards an issue that can be 'managed'. Hence, the 'proper and respectful management' of migration is presented as a common objective of bilateral cooperation. The acknowledgement that migration is a 'shared issue' and the willingness to contribute towards 'managing' migration was a sea change in perspective for Mexico, which had argued for a long time that migration was an organic flow that could not be controlled by governments (Interview with former US government official, Washington, January 2010).

Third, these quotes illustrate the use of the trafficking terminology. As Aradau (2004) has shown, the trafficking term is not a neutral concept. Similarly, Walters (2010) has argued that the trafficking terminology has technicalizing effects in the context of EU policy on illegal immigration. In the context of the partnership discourse examined here, the trafficking terminology serves to reframe the issue of 'illegal migration' into a problem of 'trafficking', which implicates new actors and suggests different solutions. The focus is shifted towards the traffickers and towards preventing their organization and activities, which is presented as being in the common interest of both countries, based on a criminalization of traffickers. This has resulted in bilateral cooperation on anti-trafficking initiatives, and the linking of trafficking to other forms of 'cross-border crime', i.e. drugs and arms smuggling. The reframing of migration as a management and trafficking issue within the partnership discourse has depoliticizing effects in shifting the attention away from political questions related to the root causes of migration.

A fourth feature of the partnership discourse, which emerged in the late nineteen-nineties, is the principle of 'shared responsibility', also called 'common' or 'joint' responsibility. This notion has been implicit since the start of intensified bilateral dialogue on migration, even though in the early nineteen-nineties, the focus was mainly on exchanging information on the position and activities of each country. By the turn of the millennium, the notion of shared responsibility had become the basis upon which bilateral and regional migration cooperation was built. This was made explicit in the Mexican National Development Plan 2001-2006, where the Fox administration emphasized the intention to re-conceptualize the migration phenomenon and to approach the US in order to negotiate a comprehensive migration agreement, based on the concept of 'shared responsibility':

En este sentido, es importante señalar que si bien México ha logrado un cúmulo de acuerdos y mecanismos para asegurar un mejor trato a nuestros connacionales en el extranjero, el tema migratorio, particularmente en Estados Unidos, requiere un nuevo enfoque de largo plazo que permita que *la movilidad y residencia de los nacionales mexicanos sea segura, digna, legal y ordenada, y que se abandone la visión de persecución policiaca del fenómeno y se le conciba como un fenómeno laboral y social*. Es por ello necesaria una negociación integral que aborde las raíces estructurales del fenómeno, sus manifestaciones y consecuencias, y que considere la atención de la migración como una

responsabilidad compartida.⁹ (Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 2001:61) [My emphasis]

Through this statement, Mexico officially acknowledges its responsibilities for the migration phenomenon, whereas previously migration was perceived as an immigration problem of the US. This quote also highlights a moment of struggle over the framing of migration between Mexico and the US: while Mexico frames migration as a 'labour and social phenomenon' and insists on 'secure, dignified, legal and orderly mobility' for its nationals, it calls for a shift away from understanding migration as something to be prosecuted and policed, referring to the US framing of the issue.

The notion of shared responsibility was further emphasized through the report entitled *Mexico-US Migration: A Shared Responsibility*, elaborated in anticipation of the meeting on 16 February 2001 between President Fox and President Bush. In this report, the US-Mexico Migration Panel argues that there is a need to base a comprehensive migration agreement on a 'spirit of shared responsibilities':

Special regional relationships have typically included variable elements of sharing associated burdens and responsibilities. A North American vision should aspire to nothing less.
(US-Mexico Migration Panel 2001:29)

This principle was reiterated on many occasions, such as in a Joint Communiqué of the High-level Working Group on migration headed by the cabinet members of both countries charged with Foreign Affairs and immigration, which met for the first time on 4 April 2001:

Both governments view this process as an *exercise of shared responsibility*, with a long term perspective, to ensure that migration of Mexicans to the United States is of *mutual opportunity and benefit*. Both governments are also committed to the regulation and safety of persons at our *common border*.
(High-level group on migration 4 April 2001) [My emphasis]

Similarly, the BNC stated in 2002: 'The Working Group reaffirmed the importance of ensuring that the migration dialogue continues based on the principles of cooperation and shared responsibility, to contribute to the well-being of both nations' (BNC 26 November 2002). The notion of 'shared responsibility' for migration also spread to become a key principle for cooperation in the North and Central America region, underlying the dialogue within the Regional Consultation Mechanism (RCM). Thus, the Final Communiqué of the RCM meeting in 2008 states:

In Tela, Honduras, the Vice-Ministers underscored that the RCM had matured into a regional dialogue that examines migration challenges and opportunities with a comprehensive perspective and the goal of developing

regional responses that emphasised common responsibility in addressing these issues.'

(RCM 8–9 May 2008)

Over the years, the partnership discourse has changed. During the honeymoon period, the focus was on a partnership for prosperity, which was seen as the overall aim of bilateral cooperation between the two countries, and of trilateral cooperation including Canada. It also gave rise to the 'Partnership for Prosperity' launched in 2001 (see above). This notion is based on the linking of migration, regional integration and economic growth. After 9/11, the partnership discourse experienced another transformation: security became the overarching concern, and all cooperation areas between the two countries, including migration, were then viewed through the security lens. This securitization tendency in the aftermath of 9/11 has been noted by numerous authors (Bigo 2002). Waller Meyers and Papademetriou (2002) for example state:

The most significant change is that immigration, as with all policy issues, is now viewed through a security lens. Security is the utmost priority and security-related issues have replaced all others at the top of Washington's agenda. Any immigration proposals that resurface on the political agenda, such as regularization of status or issuance of student visas, will be geared toward this overriding policy concern.

(Waller Meyers and Papademetriou 2002)

Since 9/11, the notion of partnership had been used mainly to refer to 'security partners' or 'border partners', such as in the bilateral *Border Partnership* concluded in March 2002, and the 2005 trilateral *Security and Prosperity Partnership* (see below). However, and this is most relevant for the purpose of this paper, the notion of 'shared interests' and 'shared responsibility' as the basis for bilateral cooperation persists. It is now mainly applied to border cooperation, as Presidents Bush and Fox affirmed in their Joint Statement on 22 March 2002:

We share a vision of a modern border that speeds the legitimate flow of people and commerce, and filters out all that threatens our safety and prosperity.

(President Bush and President Fox 22 March 2002)

The most recent transformation of the partnership discourse has been the emergence of the notion of 'strategic partnership'. This term was circulated initially in 2005 in a report of the Study Group at the Mexico Institute of the Wilson Center, entitled *The United States and Mexico: Forging a Strategic Partnership*, and reiterated in another report in 2009 called *The United States and Mexico: Towards a Strategic Partnership* (Study Group on US–Mexico Relations 2005, Working Groups on US–Mexico Relations January 2009). The term, mainly elaborated by these two policy reports, was used by Obama during his election campaign:¹⁰

As president, I will restore that leadership by working to advance the common prosperity and security of all of the people of the Americas. That work must begin with a renewed *strategic partnership* with Mexico.
(Senator Obama 20 February 2008) [My emphasis]

Based on the conviction that ‘terrorism, organised crime, and public security create common threats and shared responsibilities that require creative bilateral solutions’, a strategic partnership, as outlined in the two reports, aims to achieve prosperity and security for both countries (Study Group on US-Mexico Relations 2005:5):

We believe that the two countries have much to gain from a *strategic partnership* that addresses collaboration in areas that can generate *positive mutual benefits*. These are *win/win opportunities*, where cooperation can contribute to the security and well-being of citizens in both countries. Some of the opportunities involve *common objectives*, where both countries *share the same interests*; in other cases they have *complementary objectives*, where interests may not be identical but they are convergent. We argue that the central goals of this strategic partnership should be to: Ensure the *mutual security* of both nations, and enhance the competitiveness of both economies.
(Study Group on US-Mexico Relations 2005:5) [My emphasis]

After taking office, in April 2009 President Obama made his first trip to Mexico (Office of the Press Secretary 16 April 2009). In a joint press conference on 16 April, he stated:

I see this visit – as I know President Calderón does – as an opportunity to launch a *new era of cooperation and partnership* between our two nations, an era built on an even firmer foundation of *mutual responsibility and mutual respect and mutual interest*.
(President Obama and President Calderón 16 April 2009) [My emphasis]

This notion of partnership is based on the same underlying principles, such as the reaching of common goals, the creation of win-win situations and mutual benefits. Yet, in comparison to earlier understandings of partnership – which were based on a broad understanding of partnership associated with friendship, good neighbourhood and mutual trust as a strong foundation of any dialogue and agreement – the ‘strategic partnership’ focuses mainly on specific areas where the two partners can perceive common interests and objectives.

In sum, the partnership discourse contributed to depoliticization in three main ways. Firstly, the construction of, and focus on, issues of common interest and benefits leaves out the points of contention and political disagreements and zero-sum issues. Secondly, by reframing migration as something that can be managed through a win-win approach, cooperation focused on specific, ‘technical’ areas – such as consular protection, humane detention and repatriation procedures, border

control, and information exchange – marginalizing more contentious political issues. Thirdly, by reframing the issue of ‘illegal migration’ as a trafficking problem, the focus was shifted towards the traffickers and their activities, which allowed for cooperation on anti-trafficking operations, while shifting the focus away from political questions related to the root causes of ‘illegal migration’.

5. INSTITUTIONAL ELEMENTS OF DEPOLITICIZATION

The previous section has shown that certain institutions have been pivotal to the emergence, spread and establishment of the partnership discourse between Mexico and the US, and in the North and Central American region more broadly. Some of these institutions took the name of ‘partnership’, as illustrated by the bilateral *Partnership for Prosperity*, the bilateral *Border Partnerships*, and the trilateral *Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America*. This section analyses a number of institutions: the Working Group on Migration and Consular Affairs of the Binational Commission (BNC); the Border Liaison Mechanisms (BLMs) and Interior Consultation Mechanisms (ICMs); the Partnership for Prosperity (P4P); and the Regional Consultation Mechanism (RCM). For the purpose of this paper, the term institutions takes a broad meaning, referring to a wide array of institutional forms, both formal and informal, intergovernmental and transgovernmental.¹¹ Thus, the aim here is not to analyse which institutional forms prevail in the context of the partnership discourse but rather to illustrate the ways in which various institutions have been involved in spreading the partnership discourse and how they have contributed to the depoliticization process.

a) The Binational Commission (BNC), Border Liaison Mechanisms (BLMs) and Interior Consultation Mechanisms (ICMs)

The BNC was established in 1981 by Presidents Reagan and Lopez Portillo to ‘serve as a forum for meetings between Cabinet-level officials from both countries’, who met once or twice annually, to address topics requiring high-level attention (Bush Administration 4 September 2001b). Meeting in plenary sessions and working groups, they discussed a complex and diverse range of bilateral issues with international and domestic impact (US Department of State May 1994). Partly as an outgrowth of the BNC, contacts between the two governments at every level from staff to Cabinet officials proliferated (US Department of State May 1994). The BNC consisted of a number of working groups, one of which was the Working Group on Migration and Consular Affairs (BNCWGMCA), which was strengthened in 1994. The strengthening of the BNCWGMCA has to be situated in the context of NAFTA, which resulted in several initiatives for dialogue on bilateral issues beyond trade, such as migration and border issues. The aim was to exchange information and launch a dialogue in order to build trust. This led to the institutionalization of channels for regular and regulated communication and information exchange.

The BNCWGMCA contributed towards the technicalization of migration and border issues by focusing on the exchange of information and procedural issues linked to the repatriation of ‘criminal aliens’ or by coordinating anti-trafficking initiatives. A former participant of the BNC recalls:

A lot of our discussions at the BNC were over security issues, for example, if the US is returning criminal aliens, what kind of notice should Mexico receive, and through what process, so that Mexico could run arrest warrants if there was a reason to detain them, rather than sending them back into the communities. *It’s a technical issue*, but really important! We also focused on figuring out ways to have *joint anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling operations*, how to *share data* to break up an operation simultaneously at the origin and in the US; a big law enforcement issue where both sides had an interest in dealing with.

(Interview with former member of the BNCWGMCA, Washington, January 2010) [My emphasis]

In order to reinforce the bilateral dialogue, the BNCWGMCA commissioned a *Binational Study on Migration*, which was carried out by a binational research team and published in 1997. This Study was a joint effort by twenty scholars from both countries who collaborated on the production of a report covering numerous aspects of Mexico-to-US migration, including the characteristics of the Mexican-born population in the US, the causes and consequences of migration, and the responses to migration in each country (Binational Study 1997). Evoking the partnership discourse, the final document states that ‘this study itself derives from the new spirit of cooperation’ (Binational Study 1997:4).

This Study contributed to the process of consensus and trust building. It also served to defuse tensions in the bilateral dialogue by turning migration into a matter of measurement and technical issues. For the field of development, Walters has argued: ‘Poverty, inequality and starvation become statistics and objectives to be mitigated. Instead of a conflict, one has administration’ (Walters 2010:118–9). I suggest that, similarly, the Binational Study has contributed to turning the hot issue of migration into numbers and flows, and to making it ‘administrable’, which serves to depoliticize migration in the bilateral relationship. Thereby, migration is re-framed and turned into specific, technical problems that both parties can identify with and address through cooperation. A statement by a former participant of the Binational Study confirms this:

What happened was that for the first time we came to an agreement on the flows. Up until that point, the numbers we were using and how we were characterizing the flows were very different, and we reconciled the data from the US census and administrative data with the Mexican census and administrative data, so we were able to get in the same range. And because it was so successful, the US census do this regularly, it has become institutionalised, and we share information. And *the Binational Study also*

helped to diffuse tension over a number of issues, so that rather than try to tackle the issue when they were not going to find good solutions, or ignore it, you could study it.

(Interview with former member of the Binational Study, Washington, January 2010) [My emphasis]

The nineteen-nineties also saw the creation of other bilateral institutions, such as the Border Liaison Mechanisms (BLMs), the Interior Consultation Mechanisms (ICMs) and a whole range of 'problem-solving mechanisms largely organised informally along the border' (Bach 2001:11). As described by the US Embassy in Mexico, BLMs are 'a joint governmental instrument to further regional bilateral dialogue, in which representatives from both sides of the [...] border discuss issues of mutual interest, including public safety and law enforcement issues'.¹² The BLMs were created in 1993, and chaired by the Consuls General, bringing together local, municipal, state and federal officials from both sides of the border, as well as business and community representatives. The BLMs work to develop joint actions to help resolve local problems, such as cross-border law enforcement issues, health concerns, and coordination of port security and operation.

The ICMs had a similar mission for the interior states of the US. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Consular Protection of their nationals signed by the two countries in 1996 made reference to the *Consultation Mechanisms on Immigration and Naturalization Service Activities and Consular Protection*, which were aimed at 'sharing information concerning migratory practices and procedures by authorities on both sides of the border, and resolving problems at the local level' (MoU 7 May 1996). In 1998, they were renamed *Interior Consultation Mechanisms* and a MoU was signed between the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Mexican Foreign Ministry (SRE) in the context of the BNC meeting in Washington (MoU 11 June 1998). This MoU aimed at 'formalising and institutionalising' the ICMs with the objective of providing 'a forum to improve communication between INS managers and Mexican Consuls regarding Mexican migrants' and aimed to 'resolve problems of mutual concern' (MoU 11 June 1998). More specifically, the ICMs were supposed to:

respond to issues that arise at the local level, concerning [the] provision of consular protection and access to Mexican migrants in INS custody, respect for the human rights of migrants, conduct of INS District officials and Patrol agents, safe and orderly removal of migrants repatriated to Mexico under local border arrangements, and attention to complaints relating to professional conduct by both Mexican and U.S. officials, including non-immigration authorities involved in these cases.

(MoU 11 June 1998)

The MoU specified that ICMs should be co-chaired by INS District Directors and Chief Patrol Agents, and Mexican Consuls General or Consuls, and that each ICM had the possibility to determine 'local entities, public and private' that could participate

in the meetings to be held at the local and regional level (MoU 11 June 1998). According to several respondents, these bilateral mechanisms were very vibrant during the nineteen-nineties, but have weakened over time (Interviews Washington DC, January 2010).

As illustrated above, the focus of the ICMs was on specific 'technical' issues linked to procedures of repatriation and consular protection. In sum, the BLMs and the ICMs were problem-solving oriented (Bach 2001:14). While they did provide a space for dialogue at the local level, they were explicitly created to address specific common concerns, mainly linked to repatriation processes. These two institutions enabled and increased cooperation between US and Mexican officials on specific, 'technical' issues in a largely depoliticized environment. Thus, the establishment of a number of bilateral institutions in the nineteen-nineties allowed for an increased dialogue between the two countries, but had the effect of depoliticizing the sensitive issue of migration between the two countries.

b) Partnership for Prosperity (P4P)

The P4P was a product of the bilateral dialogue between President Bush and President Fox during 2001 (Storrs 2006:4). This public-private alliance of Mexican and US governmental and business organizations was mentioned in the Guanajuato Proposal signed by the two presidents in February 2001, and officially launched in September of the same year. It stated: 'to address some of the root causes of migration, Presidents Bush and Fox have agreed to form a public-private alliance to spur private-sector economic growth throughout Mexico' (Bush Administration 6 September 2001). The idea was to 'draw upon the best ideas of US and Mexican economists, businesspeople, development experts, and policymakers' (Bush Administration 6 September 2001). Thereby, the P4P was described as a 'forum for open dialogue on economic objectives, joint projects, and new ideas' (P4P Website),¹³ which aimed at 'unfettering the economic potential of people in the parts of Mexico where growth has lagged and fueled migration' (Bush Administration 22 March 2002). Participating actors in the P4P included US governmental institutions (e.g. USAID¹⁴, US Department of State and the US Treasury Department); Mexican governmental institutions (e.g. federal development agency SEDESOL, trade and finance departments and state financial institutions); international financial institutions (e.g. Inter-American Development Bank); private business actors (e.g. IBM, GM, Ford and Citibank); and Non-Profit NGOs (e.g. Pan American Development Foundation and Aid to Artisans). Within the P4P, concrete projects were implemented, such as programmes to promote the formalization of remittance flows; the reduction of transfer costs and the increase of access to financial services (e.g. bank accounts or remittances services); education and exchange programmes (e.g. TIESⁱ); mortgage services (e.g. remittances for housing in Mexico); identity cards for migrants to allow them access to financial services (e.g. *Matricula Consular*); and involvement of the diaspora in development

projects (mainly through remittances for productive projects involving USAID among others). With the signing of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), the P4P lost momentum and was partly integrated into the new trilateral partnership, which has come to an end under the Obama Administration.

In the Guanajuato Proposal establishing the P4P the two presidents emphasized:

We are united, as never before, by values and interests that cover the entire span of our rich and broad relationship. [...] This common outlook is the basis for a full, mature, and equitable partnership for prosperity. [...] We believe our two nations can now build an authentic partnership for prosperity, based on shared democratic values and open dialogue that bring great benefits to our people. [...] We will do so as friends, in a spirit of mutual trust and respect.

(President Bush and President Fox 16 February 2001a)

The quotation illustrates the presence of the partnership discourse, emphasizing common values, mutual trust and a 'full, mature, and equitable partnership'. At first sight, the emphasis on 'addressing the root causes of migration' seems to announce a rather 'political' project. Thus, the underlying issues that the P4P is supposed to address are the asymmetries between the two countries that spur Mexican emigration to the US, which is a highly sensitive political issue. However, the way in which the P4P addresses this issue is by focusing on specific projects where the two countries have 'shared' interests, e.g. banking and remittance services, and education exchanges. Thus, the P4P depoliticizes the issue of asymmetries by reframing it in terms of a joint project of 'common prosperity'. The political issue regarding the root causes of migration and asymmetries between the two countries becomes framed as an issue that can be addressed through increased business cooperation between the two countries.

At the time of its establishment, i.e. after 9/11, the P4P also served to depoliticize and defuse tensions between the two countries, as one of my respondents argues:

When 9/11 happened, President Fox was not fast enough to say the right things and it was really a stupid thing, because the Bush-Fox relations were quite good. And there was a backlash in the US administration against Mexico and the migration agreement, which was the centrepiece for the Fox administration. After we got over our peak and they got over what had happened, there was an effort on the part of both White Houses to figure out ways to start saying nice things to and about each other, and that's what the P4P was all about, it was about having something that wasn't security focused, was collaborative, and the concept of the P4P was a very nice concept, it was a talking point, the two presidents could get together and announce something that was positive, and I'm not sure it ever was more than that.

(Interview with migration expert, Washington, January 2010)

Hence, given the sensitive political climate between the two countries, the P4P served to allow them to return to dialogue and cooperation on specific uncontroversial and non-political issues.

c) The Regional Conference on Migration (RCM)

The RCM, also called Puebla Process, was established in 1996.¹⁵ The establishment of such Regional Consultation Processes (RCPs) and cooperation mechanisms on migration had been encouraged by the Cairo Conference in 1994. The RCM is an intergovernmental regional migration forum that brings together 11 states from the North and Central America region (RCM Brochure undated). Several countries from the Americas and international organizations – such as IOM, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – have been admitted as observers. NGOs also have observer status in the RCM, organized within the Regional Network for Civil Organizations on Migration (RNCOM).¹⁶ The RCM works through the annual Vice-Ministerial Meeting and the Regional Consultation Group on Migration (RCGM), which represents the technical and operational level of the RCM, consisting of national General Directors of Migration or Directors of Consular Affairs, and was created ‘to implement and follow-up of political decisions’ (RCM 12 May 2004). With the technical cooperation and logistical support of IOM and the financial support of the member countries, the RCM has created a Technical Secretariat that is in charge of preparing the meetings and following up on items discussed and decisions taken during the Vice-Ministerial Meetings (RCM 12 May 2004). The thematic focus of the RCM concentrates on three issues: migration policy and management, in particular human trafficking and smuggling and return; human rights of migrants; and migration and development.¹⁷

As mentioned above, the RCM has been important in spreading the partnership discourse both between Mexico and the US as well as more broadly throughout the region. This is also the case more generally for RCPs, which, as stated in the IOM World Migration Report from 2003, ‘manag[e] migration through partnership and cooperation’ (IOM 2003:135). Thereby, RCPs should be based on ‘common understandings, recognition of national and regional interests, state sovereignty, respect for the rule of law and internationally recognized principles, shared appreciation of sound practices in migration management, and mutual trust and partnership’, and ‘shared responsibility and consensus between countries of origin and arrival’ (ibid:136, 173). Hence, all the key ingredients of the partnership discourse identified above are present. The notion of shared responsibility also plays a key role in the RCM, as a member of the RCM reports:

The issue of partnership and also the issue of shared responsibility have been constantly mentioned at the RCM. [...] The issue of shared responsibility has been part of the evolving process of the RCM.

(Interview with RCM member, January 2010)

The RCM was also instrumental in establishing and spreading the trafficking terminology to become the basis for regional cooperation. As a former US government official recalls:

In the nineteen-nineties, the Mexicans were making the case that labour migration, or migration in general, was an organic movement that was beyond the ability of receiving or sending states to regulate, and so the only thing you could possibly do was to make sure it was a safe process. In the agenda of the RCM in Puebla, they didn't even want to have a discussion on illegal migration, trafficking or smuggling, but we insisted on it. This is a tough nut for Mexico to buy, to acknowledge that there was a legal component, that there was an institutional threatening aspect to illegal migration, and that the traffickers, smugglers were violent criminal enterprise preying on their nationals, and it also forced them to wake up to the fact of their own treatment of Central Americans at their Southern border.'

(Interview with former US government official, Washington, January 2010)

As illustrated, the reframing of 'illegal migration' in trafficking terms had profound depoliticization effects. It allowed the two countries to rally against a common 'enemy': the traffickers and their activities. This also removed some of the blame from sending countries' shoulders for allowing citizens to leave the country and become illegal migrants. Thereby, the focus was shifted away from the root causes of migration and the question of why trafficking has become such a lucrative business. The problem of 'illegal migration' could now supposedly be addressed through bilateral anti-trafficking measures.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the different ingredients of the partnership discourse that emerged in the 1990s, and the ways in which it contributed to a process of depoliticization of migration regulation in the Mexico-US bilateral relationship. The analysis points to the potential relevance of the findings beyond the Mexico-US context for the North and Central America region more broadly; yet, this would need to be substantiated through further research.

The literature on depoliticization has shown how this process can have various implications (Barry 2002, Ferguson 1994, Walters 2010). In the case of the partnership discourse and its institutional elements analysed in this paper, we can identify a number of consequences. Seen from a policy-maker's viewpoint, the depoliticization of migration governance in this context would seem a success.¹⁸ It allowed for the establishment and institutionalization of dialogue and cooperation between Mexico and the US on an issue that was long a taboo. It served to overcome political taboos and build trust, and promoted more intense cooperation on specific

issues of common interest to both countries. Various technically-oriented institutions were established to solve specific local problems or to deal with cross-border issues, and increased implementation and enforcement.

Exploring the broader implications of the depoliticization of migration governance the Mexico–US context from a more critical viewpoint, we can identify at least three consequences. Firstly, it led to a socialization of ‘partner’ countries into becoming responsible for their own migration management. Thus, for example, Mexico (and other Central American countries) established and reformed their legislations and institutions to better manage migration (Interview with former US government official, Washington, January 2010). They now also increasingly assume responsibility for their nationals abroad through consular protection networks and through institutions offering services to migrants.

Secondly, through depoliticization, certain stakeholders became marginalized or excluded from the debate, while others gained in importance. Given that migration issues have been turned into technical matters, technical and bureaucratic personnel gained importance. At the same time, other actors became marginalized or excluded, such as NGOs that focus too much on critical assessment and fail to offer solutions and services to deal with these technical issues; parliaments (see Bigo 2002:83); and migrants who became portrayed as victims who need to be protected, or as rational beings who need to be prevented from entering the US (see Walters 2008, 2010).

Last but not least, it seems that through these depoliticization processes migration management has become an integral component of good governance. This is a development that Walters has observed for the European context:

[N]ot content with securing its own perimeter, the EU seeks to contribute to a much wider movement which is today elevating border control to the point where it is typically represented as one of the most vital expressions and responsibilities of sovereign statehood. Alongside other agencies, such as the IOM, and through its “external dimension”, its myriad “partnerships” and “dialogues”, the EU is clearly engaged in an almost worldwide campaign to promote border control as a central plank of good governance.
(Walters 2008:58)

I argue that in the Mexico–US context, this has been happening with migration management since the nineteen-nineties, enabled through the partnership discourse and its institutional elements analysed in this paper. Couched in the terms of ‘professionalization’ and ‘increasing standards’, there has been an increasing normalization of migration management and legislative practices, including the use of ever more advanced technology, which has turned these practices into an integral part of what is understood as ‘good governance’. Affirming the right and responsibility of each country for its own migration legislation and management, the following statement by the BNCWGMCA illustrates this:

Both delegations recognized the complexity of migration between the two countries and the need to address its different aspects in a comprehensive manner. They emphasized the importance of increasing cooperation with respect to *shared migration problems*, taking into account the asymmetries between their economies, labor markets and recognizing that a comprehensive, long-term solution to the phenomenon relies on Mexico's stability and sustained economic development. This calls for cooperation to promote growth, employment and the well-being of the two nations *while recognizing the sovereign right of each of our countries to protect its borders and to enforce its own immigration laws and regulations.*

(BNC 13-14 February 1995) [My emphasis]

This paper has shown that in the context of Mexico–US relations on migration, the partnership discourse is neither mere rhetoric or business as usual, nor does it necessarily mark a shift towards a more egalitarian relationship between the two countries and less control-oriented activities. Instead, the analysis has highlighted the performative function of the partnership discourse and its institutional elements, which contribute to depoliticize migration governance and to create a new framework for cooperation. Yet, despite all the dialogue and partnerships, the political issues itself, i.e. the economic asymmetries in the region and the continued undocumented migration from Central America towards Mexico, and from Central America and Mexico towards the US and Canada, have not really been addressed. In this paper, some references have been made to the struggles over different ways of framing migration between the two countries, highlighting that the partnership discourse has not been established without contestation and setbacks, and that the depoliticization of migration governance is always temporary and fragile. Further analysis into these moments of struggle regarding the partnership discourse, and instances of re-politicization of migration governance is needed.

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NOTES

1. This paper was elaborated in the context of the research project 'Migration partnerships: a step towards the global governance of international migration?', based at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland. Funding by the Swiss Network for International Studies in Geneva (SNIS), the Federal Office for Migration and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs is gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank all the respondents who generously agreed to give their time for interviews, upon which this paper is partly based.
2. The notion of 'shared responsibility' has already become integrated in the field of refugee protection (see for example Aleinikoff 2003).
3. A list of the documents analysed is provided in the bibliography. In selecting the documents considered for the analysis, temporal, actor-based and type-based criteria were observed. The software analysis tool ATLAS.ti was used for coding and analysing the documents.
4. I would like to thank all my respondents. To guarantee their anonymity, their names will not be mentioned here.
5. A detailed discussion of this literature goes beyond the scope of this paper.
6. This 'historic opportunity' for a re-conceptualization of the migration and border issues and a comprehensive migration agreement has been explained through a number of factors, including the unique personal friendship between the two presidents, their simultaneous election, the fact that they were both governors in border regions and thus familiar with migration issues, that they were both from the opposition political party when they were elected and could thus take a radically new approach, and not only the foreign policy focus on Mexico of President Bush, but also that US border and immigration policies during the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties had produced a 'dysfunctional immigration system that had not only been unsuccessful in deterring immigration, but also had generated negative consequences for both immigrants and the United States (Fernández de Castro and Clariond Rangel 2008:146, US-Mexico Migration Panel 2001:5). Other factors include the sustained period of economic growth and low unemployment in the US and a tacit alliance between US labor unions and employers for immigration policy reform' (Watts 2002:7).
7. Although the US president has the authority to propose reforms on immigration, such legislation must ultimately be enacted by Congress (Rosenblum 2006:94).
8. It goes without saying that the Clinton administration did not have the same discourse on partnership as the Bush administration. Yet, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to analyse in detail the variations of the partnership discourse over time.
9. Translation: 'In this sense, it is important to note that although Mexico has managed to conclude a number of agreements and mechanisms to ensure a better treatment of Mexicans abroad, the migration issue, particularly in the US, needs a new, long-term approach that allows dignified, legal and orderly mobility and residence for Mexican nationals, and there is a need to abandon the perspective that perceives the phenomenon in a 'police prosecution' way, instead of perceiving it as a labour and social phenomenon. For this reason, we need comprehensive negotiations that address the structural roots of the phenomenon, its manifestations and consequences, and that consider migration management as a shared responsibility.'
10. Interestingly, the Obama Administration has also cast 'strategic multilateralism' as one of their actions for 're-engagement' with public international law. See Harold Koh's speech to ASIL annual meeting on 25 March 2010: <http://www.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>.
11. While intergovernmentalism means cooperation between states, transgovernmental cooperation refers to interactions among subunits of different governments.
12. See: <http://mexico.usembassy.gov/eng/releases/ep050824BLM.html>

13. See: http://p4p.fox.presidencia.gob.mx/p4p_us.php?seccion=sobre
 14. USAID's Training, Internship, Education and Scholarship Program (TIES) creates partnerships with universities to provide scholarships for graduate studies and joint research faculty exchanges. The programme provides US\$ 50 million for a seven-year initiative to enhance the capacity of higher education institutions, whereby the first US\$ 4 million of USAID funding has been matched by US\$ 6 million in private funding (P4P 25 November 2002:9).
 15. See: <http://www.rcmvs.org/>
 16. See: <http://www.rcmvs.org/>
 17. See Hay (2007:91-95) for a discussion of the policy-maker's discourse on depoliticization.
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