

# Empirical evidence on return migration from Spain to Ecuador. Discourse, myth or reality?

Evidencias empíricas sobre el retorno migratorio España-Ecuador.  
¿Discurso, mito o realidad?

Gorka Moreno-Márquez y José Álvarez-Román

*Universidad del País Vasco, España/  
Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, Ecuador*

## *Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of international return migration. To this end different statistical sources are analysed and several in-depth interviews conducted in order to quantify the scale of the return migration taking place in the population of Ecuadorian origin resident in Spain. Starting from this premise, we can emphasise that the phenomenon of return migration to Ecuador, although it has increased appreciably in recent years as a consequence of the economic crisis in Spain, is not proving to be massive. This assertion poses the need for reflecting on the return policies that have been implemented to date and on what the priorities should be in both the country of origin and the receiver country when protecting and providing support to the international migrant population.

*Key words:* Migrations, return, development, economic crisis, public policies.

## *Resumen*

A través de este artículo se analiza con profundidad el fenómeno del retorno dentro de las migraciones internacionales. Para ello, se utilizan diferentes fuentes de información estadísticas y se realizan varias entrevistas en profundidad con el objeto de cuantificar la magnitud del retorno que se está dando dentro de la población de origen ecuatoriano residente en España. Partiendo de esta premisa podemos destacar que el fenómeno del retorno hacia Ecuador se ha incrementado sensiblemente en los últimos años como consecuencia de la crisis económica en España; sin embargo, no está resultando masivo. Esta afirmación plantea la necesidad de reflexionar en torno a las políticas de retorno que se han implementado hasta ahora y sobre cuáles deben ser las prioridades tanto del país de origen como el de destino a la hora de proteger y ofrecer apoyo a la población migrante internacional.

*Palabras clave:* Migraciones, retorno, desarrollo, crisis económica, políticas públicas.

## INTRODUCCIÓN

**I**n recent years the issue of return migration has acquired a certain relevance in the study of international migrations. This is largely due to the conjugation of several elements, such as the process of maturation of many of the migratory projects that started some decades ago, or the irruption of the economic crisis in some countries —above all European ones— and its impact on finding and keeping a job in the respective labour markets.

In the case of Spain it is this second factor that is having a decisive influence on the processes of return migration to the country of origin and also on the start of new migratory projects to a third country. In fact, the immigrant collective is one of the groups that is being most affected by the economic crisis and the increase of unemployment in Spain (IOÉ, 2012; Aja, Arango and Oliver, 2013; Valero, Romay and Valero, 2014). In this context the return or departure of the population of immigrant origin has acquired importance in Spain, both from the political or media point of view, and from the academic level of scientific analysis of the phenomenon.

Return migration addresses questions such as how many return, who, when or why (Cassarino, 2004). In our case we focus on precisely the first of these questions – quantification – and specifically on the return of the population of Ecuadorian origin, which is one of the collectives that arrived at the start of the great migratory wave that arrived in Spain in the decade of the 2000s (Cachón, 2002; Carrasco and Izquierdo, 2005). In addition, it proves to be an especially interesting collective, due to the dynamic of economic growth that is taking place in the country of origin – Ecuador – and to a series of public policies that have centred on encouraging and facilitating return amongst this collective. Specifically, we make a quantitative analysis of the scale of the phenomenon to be able to delineate it and evaluate whether the expectations, discourse and measures implemented are equal to the true reality and quantity of return migration.

With respect to the structure of the article, in the first place we make a review of the bibliography and theoretical antecedents related to return migration and international migrations in general, and we then focus on those works and studies analysing this issue that are directly associated with Ecuadorian reality. Next, we present the methodology, techniques and

sources employed in realising this work. In the third section, we set out the results of our study, indicating and highlighting the most relevant aspects. Finally, in the section of conclusions and reflections we note the most striking and important results of our work and pose a series of reflections related to the public policies of return and their relation to the social and economic development of the country of origin.

## RETURN MIGRATION FROM SPAIN TO ECUADOR

The phenomenon of return migration has frequently fallen outside the great fields of study on international migrations. In this respect, Russell King notes that ‘return migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration’ (King, 2002: 7). In fact, the theories of migrations have not analysed return migration in depth (Durand, 2004) or have frequently done so in an indirect or tangential way (Casarino, 2004). One example of this is that return migration as a migratory sub-phenomenon did not receive any substantial treatment until the 1980s (Kubat, 1984; King, 1986).

In any case, it can be stressed that the classical theories on international migrations have analysed this type of migrations over the course of recent decades (Jáuregui and Recaño, 2014). The *neoclassical theory* relates return migration to the non-fulfilment of economic and/or work expectations in the destination country (Sjaastad, 1962; Harris and Todaro, 1970). Thus, return migration decreases as the stay in the destination country lengthens and the migratory project becomes increasingly successful (Constant and Massey, 2003; De Haas, Fokkema and Fihri, 2015). In contrast to the neoclassical theory, the *structuralist theory* stresses that return migration is not exclusively a result of the migrants’ will, but instead responds to structural and socioeconomic factors in both the destination country and the country of origin (Papademetriou, 1985; King, 1986). In this case, the *theory of networks* emphasises the importance of formal and informal links, both in undertaking the project of return and in its success or failure (Constant and Massey, 2002).

But if the analysis of return migration has acquired relevance in the study of international migrations in recent years, this has been due above all to transnational theory, which has provided contributions that go beyond the neoclassical economic vision and complement those of other classical theories. Transnationalism argues that thanks to the technological developments of recent decades, amongst other questions, relations between the country of origin and the destination country have multiplied (Schramm, 2011; Carling and Erdal, 2014). This context facilitates the emergence of

transnational links and identities and there is no break with the country of origin (Portes, 1995; Guarnizo, 2003). In such a scenario return migration is an easy and feasible option (De Bree, Davids and De Haas, 2010). Similarly, transnational theories hold that return is not necessarily the final stage of the migratory project, but instead can be a further stage within it (Cavalcanti, 2013).

In many cases this revitalisation of the analysis of return migration has occurred thanks to the nexus between migrations and development, which posits return as a possible tool for economic and social development and as an innovative factor (Cerase, 1974; Hunger, 2002) that can be useful to the country of origin. In any case, there is at present a great controversy over this hypothesis and the real possibilities that return provides for development (Anwar, 1979; Ghosh, 2000; Cassarino, 2008).

With respect to the concept of return, one initial aspect that should be stressed is that there is no single, univocal definition. This term has frequently been used to refer to realities that are frequently very different. It is therefore not surprising to find it being used to refer euphemistically to situations that are much closer to expulsion or forced readmission (Cassarino, 2008), such as the case of the Return Directive approved by the European Union in 2008 for people in an irregular situation, which mainly relates to repatriation (Rodríguez, 2012). Conversely, in other cases different terms are used to refer to the same phenomenon. Some studies use terms like circulation policies or repatriation policies to refer to return policies (Smith, 1999). According to the definition provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (voluntary) return is “the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another third country based on the free will of the returnee” (OIM, 2006: 65). With respect to the existing typology, motivations and types of return we can observe different classifications.

Cerase establishes four types of return based on motivation (Cerase, 1967; 1974): *return of failure*, closely united to an experience of emigration as an unsatisfactory experience; *return of conservatism*, characterised by a migratory project with a temporary character, in which from the start the idea is to reside in the destination country for a limited time until the expected results are attained, and to then re-establish oneself in a better situation in the country of origin; *return of retirement*, for those people who have finished their professional careers in the destination country; and, finally, *return of innovation*, which involves a medium or long stay and obtaining different types of capital to set up innovative projects in the country of origin.

Based on these more classical classifications (Cerase, 1967; 1974; Bohning and Maillat, 1974; Gmelch, 1980), other more contemporary authors have also made contributions to the field of the types of return. Durand (2004), for example, mentions five types, in which, alongside motivation, he includes other factors like the temporal or legal criterion: *definitive return*, which is return following a long stay abroad and obtaining another nationality; *return of temporary workers* who participate in circular migratory programs and are obliged to return because of their contract or a legal clause; *transnational return*, which is done by descendants of the person who originally emigrated; and *return of the unsuccessful* which, although voluntary in character, occurs above all as a result of negative situations in the destination country.

For Sanz (2013), there are three types of return, depending on the motivation that causes it: *selective return*, a decision taken in order to obtain some type of advantage in the country of origin; *planned return*, which is based on a premeditated and prepared decision; and *unexpected return*, which occurs when the situation in the destination country is unsuitable.

As can be seen, we are facing a concept with a clearly multidimensional character that includes different phenomena and situations associated with the migratory phenomenon (Medina and Menjívar, 2015). In recent years the concept has acquired relevance in the study of international migrations and in different geographical areas like the United States (Guarnizo, 1996; Montoya and González, 2015), Latin America (Lozano and Martínez, 2015) or the European area (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2016).

In the concrete case of Spain, return as an object of analysis and the policies of return have acquired greater importance in recent years (Parella and Petroff, 2013; López-Sala and Oso, 2015). This is largely due to the economic crisis that this country is currently experiencing, and to the institutional encouragement given to these policies following the approval of the Return Directive and the European Agreement on immigration and asylum that was approved in 2008 in the European Union.

At present there are three official programs for the phenomenon of return migration. The oldest has been functioning since the year 2003 and is coordinated by the IOM. Following the irruption of the crisis another two were set up. The first of them – 2008 – facilitated the capitalisation of unemployment benefits in the country of origin. The second – 2010 – focused on productive return and the possibilities of training. It is in any case notable that within return migration only a small minority of people have made use of these programs (Plewa, 2009; Pajares, 2010). Moreover, the

economic crisis has even been affecting their development, since in recent years there has been an enormous reduction in the public funds aimed at financing and sustaining them. In this way, formal return has had a merely token impact within the return migration that is taking place from Spain, thus corroborating the prevalence of return with an informal or spontaneous character (King, 1999; Cassarino, 2004; Bocagni, 2011).

The reality of the phenomenon of return migration from Spain is characterised by an adverse economic and structural context and the return policies that have been applied must be placed in precisely this scenario. These policies are being used, on the one hand, as a political tool to confront migratory pressure (Mármora, 2002), but also, on the other, as media leverage to counteract certain ingrained attitudes and opinions in the host society that associate the economic crisis with factors related to immigration and immigrants.

In this scenario, study of the return patterns of the population of Ecuadorian origin is of great interest due to several factors. In the first place, the trajectory and characteristics of Ecuadorian emigration mean that study of return has above all focused on the reality of Ecuadorian emigration to the United States (Aysa-Lastra and Cachón, 2015). It is therefore interesting to analyse more recent flows and their relation to return migration (Bocagni, 2011).

In the second place, it is one of the groups with the most weight within the immigrant collective in Spain, above all since the late 1990s (Goycochea and Ramírez, 2002; Herrera, Carrillo and Torres, 2005; Herrera, 2012). In the third place, it is one of the collectives that has been most severely affected by the crisis (Iglesias et al., 2015). Thus, the rise in unemployment rates in sectors like construction and tourism has had a devastating impact on this collective. Together with this factor, the Ecuadorian collective is one that has most suffered from property speculation, above all due to the large number of those who have settled in Spain and the transition from rented property to ownership. To give one illustrative figure, according to data provided by the IOÉ Collective, in the year 2007 about half the population of Ecuadorian origin in Spain used 75% of their incomes for repayment of a mortgage loan (IOÉ, 2010: 142). In the year 2012 it was the collective of foreign origin with the highest number of repossessions – evictions – carried out against it, 5.7% of the total number of evictions that took place in Spain that year (Colegio de Registradores de España, 2013: 27).

Together with these factors that are located in the destination country, one should not ignore the position taken by the Ecuadorian government

with respect to the emigrant collective and its return to the country. Its position has been reflected at both the discursive level and in political practice.

In the first of these two fields, the migratory issue has acquired notable weight within the discourse of the government of Ecuador and its political project (Bocagni, 2011), which is based on a position involving political transnationalism (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Bauböck, 2007) that stresses the potential of migrant people for the country's development. A committed effort has been made to revitalise relations and connectivity between the country of origin and the emigrant population. In many cases the goal has not only involved their return, but also making them feel Ecuadorian in their destination country and strengthening their links with the country of origin (Bauböck, 2007b).

In this way, return emerges as an idea with great symbolic force within the official discourse of the state and as an ideological legitimator of political practice (Izaguirre, 2011). This legitimising function acquires importance both for the emigrant population abroad, and also for citizens resident in the country itself.

For example, in his investiture speech —2007— the president of the country, Rafael Correa, spoke of migrants as the *fifth region* and emphasised the value of the emigrant population as opposed to the powerful and moneyed classes: “Those in exile from poverty in our country amount to millions and, paradoxically, they are the ones who, with the sweat of their brow, have kept the economy afloat by sending remittances, while the privileged have sent their money abroad”.

But this discourse has not remained at the level of mere rhetoric; several articles and references to migration and people who have migrated are even included in the Constitution of 2008 (Ramírez and Bocagni, 2010). Article 40.4 underscores that “links with Ecuador will be promoted, family reunification will be facilitated and voluntary return will be encouraged”. The Plan for Good Living 2009-2013 also includes these aspects.

Accordingly, policies for emigrants have been based on this perspective, which is connected to the abovementioned political transnationalism or *transnationalism from above*. Following the definition outlined by Ramírez (2013: 30-51), there are several lines of action that can be stressed in this field, such as: the new consular policy, migrant votes, government offices to facilitate legislative participation by emigrants, Ecuadorian Houses abroad and presidential visits.

In the concrete field of return, together with the measures cited in the previous paragraph, the work that was done by the National Secretariat of

the Migrant (*Secretaría Nacional del Migrante* – SENAMI) is especially noteworthy. Until its absorption into the Vice-Ministry of Human Mobility in 2013, it was the organisation that managed and developed the return programs of the population of Ecuadorian origin. The SENAMI was created in March 2007 with the rank of a ministry, depending directly on the Presidency of the Republic.

- The most relevant of these measures were the “*Plan de Retorno Bienvenidos@ a Casa*” (Welcome Home Return Plan):
- Links Program: To facilitate and improve the relation between the emigrant population and the country of origin.
- “*El Cucayo*” Program: For setting up businesses in Ecuador by providing advice and economic support.
- The personal accompaniment program “Returning Home” (*Volver a casa*): To facilitate the return of Ecuadorian emigrants. The program includes different sub-programs such as household equipment, the repatriation of people in a situation of vulnerability or the repatriation of corpses.

Together with these programs, other programs with a transversal character have been implemented such as credits for people who have returned, or the offer of land for setting up agricultural projects (Moncayo, 2011). Following the absorption of SENAMI by the Vice-Ministry of Human Mobility and the later revision of the programs (Moncayo, 2011b), a large part of them vanished and at present only those relating to the third program, *Volver a casa*, have been maintained.

This institutional commitment made from the country of origin, apart from the criticisms it has received (Margueritis, 2011; Arcentales and Garbay, 2012), together with the situation and context of the destination country – Spain – make analysis of the phenomenon of return migration from Spain to Ecuador of great interest and relevance for detecting certain patterns that are similar and comparable for other groups of emigrants.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

Different data and methodology were used to elaborate this article. Concretely, a mixed methodology was chosen and statistical data were given prevalence, but qualitative techniques were also used for purposes of contrast.



Thus, different official Spanish statistical sources were employed, with the main focus on secondary data, but primary data were also taken into consideration. To make a suitable quantitative analysis of the phenomenon of Ecuadorian return migration from Spain we used data taken from the Census —on residents and residential variations—elaborated by the National Institute of Statistics (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística* – INE) and data on the naturalisation of the foreign population —from the Ministry of Employment and Social Security (*Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social* – MEYSS).

With respect to the data: the figures on people resident in Spain are for the year 2016. For the case of residential variations we used the most recent data available, which are for the year 2015. Finally, the data on the nationalisation of foreigners refer to the year 2015, which are the most recent available at present.

These different sources were used with the aim of comparing results, and also to correlate them and thus obtain a quantitative estimation of the phenomenon. At all times emphasis was placed on the potentials and weaknesses of each of the sources. Thus, the data on the resident population —the Census— provide a general vision of the scale of the immigrant phenomenon in Spain. But it is a source that must be contrasted and complemented with others. In our case we opted for the figures on the number of nationalisations and departures from the country —residential variations— in order to obtain a more precise picture.

Bearing in mind the limitations of the statistical data for analysing a phenomenon like return migration, which involves different realities and motivations, we also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with people well-acquainted with the phenomenon to test and contrast our results and thus obtain the most accurate analysis possible. Concretely, eight interviews were conducted with people representing public institutions, social organisations and the academic world. Five of these eight interviews were conducted in Spain and three in Ecuador. The information on each of the interviews is attached in an annex, while in the literal quotations that appear in the text a code is included for their identification.

## **RESULTS**

According to the Census data on the population resident in Spain, in the year 2016 there were 4,618,581 people of foreign nationality, the most relevant being Moroccan with 755,459 people. If we analyse the evolution

of the main nationalities of foreigners in Spain, we find some interesting data and patterns (Figure 1).

Source: National Institute of Statistics (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística – INE*).

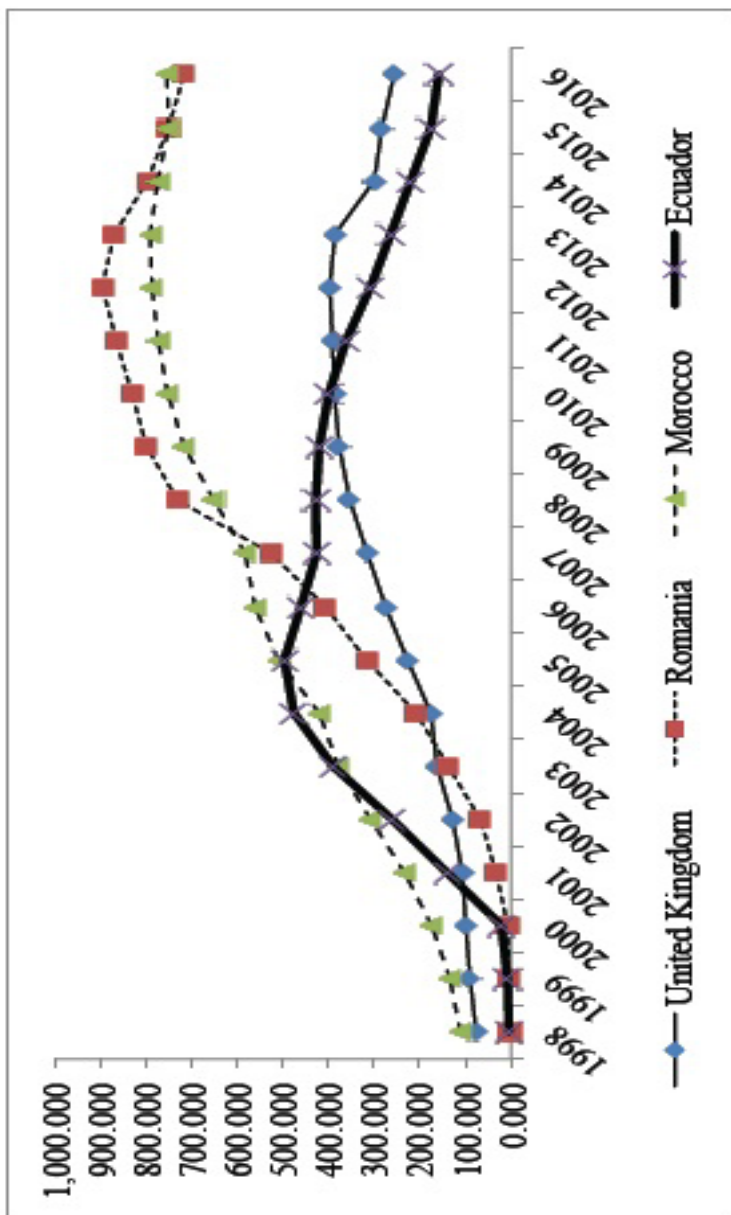


Figure 1: Evolution of the main nationalities of the foreign population in Spain, 1998-2016.

A constant population increase can be observed in the main nationalities up until the years 2013 and 2014; in the following years there is a fall in the foreign population in the four nationalities, more moderate in the Moroccan case and more pronounced in that of the United Kingdom and Romania. In contrast, in the case of Ecuadorian nationality the pattern is different and the increase occurs up until 2005 and is then followed by a significant fall; from being the most relevant nationality in the 2003-2004 period, it drops to fourth place from 2013 until 2016.

Concretely, the figure shows that the increase of the Ecuadorian population takes place in the period between the years 2000 and 2005, rising from 20,481 people in 2000 to 497,799 in 2005. From this point onwards the Ecuadorian population resident in Spain starts to fall, dropping to 158,285 people in the year 2016. A simple mathematical operation might lead one to think that the Ecuadorian population that has left Spain numbers around 339,514 personas (68.2%), which is the difference between the time of the biggest population and the present time, and thus confirm that return migration—or at least departure from Spain—is very significant and more intense than in other nationalities.

However, to better understand these data the process of naturalisations that has occurred in recent years must be taken into account, a process in which Ecuador has participated to a great degree. In fact, if we analyse the data available since the year 2002—Table 1—it can be seen that Ecuador is the nationality of origin in which most Spanish naturalisations have taken place, 361,344 in the 2002-2015 period, almost 30% (29.8%) of the total (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Naturalisations of the foreign population in Spain by the main nationalities. 2002-2015

	2006-2015	
	N	%
Total	1 084 802	100.0
Ecuador	251 719	23.2
Colombia	179 069	16.5
Morocco	156 326	14.4
Perú	86 146	7.9
Bolivia	62 533	5.8
Argentina	49 826	4.6
Dominican Republic	49 575	4.6
Cuba	32 428	3.0
Venezuela	23 916	2.2
Brasil	19 085	1.8
10 principal nationalities	910 623	83.9

**Source:** Ministry of Employment and Social Security (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social – MEYSS).

This circumstance is based on two factors. On one side, the Spanish regulation on naturalisations establishes that the majority of people proceeding from Latin America need to demonstrate two years of authorised residency to be able to apply for nationality, while the general regulation requires ten years authorised residency. If we add to this the fact that the Ecuadorian population largely arrived at the start of the migratory wave in Spain, we can understand this high intensity in the process of naturalisations.

These questions are relevant as they partly distort the data on the population resident in Spain —cited in the previous figure— since people with double nationality —Ecuadorian and Spanish in our case— only appear with Spanish nationality in the official statistics. Thus, there is a significant underrepresentation of the Ecuadorian collective when only the Census data are examined.

In fact, if we add the data from this register to those of naturalisations, we can see that the figure for the Ecuadorian population is appreciably higher, totalling 519,629 people in 2015 —much closer to the two main nationalities, Moroccan and Romanian. Indeed, if we bear in mind the data analysed in this paragraph, we can see that there is an even greater population of Ecuadorian origin at present than there was in the year 2005—497,799.

However, one should not conclude from this figure that there are more people of Ecuadorian origin at the present time, since the figures on obtaining Spanish nationality do not provide information on whether the person concerned is resident in Spain or another country. In other words, the sum of people with Ecuadorian nationality alone registered in Spain and the number of people of Ecuadorian origin with Spanish nationality, tells us that this process in this collective has been massive and long-lasting, but it does not provide us with more or less reliable data on the phenomenon of return migration.

The best option for overcoming this limitation is to exclude the nationality criterion in relation to the process of naturalisations, and instead to use the place of birth of the population resident in Spain as the main criterion. This enables us to make a more precise analysis of the phenomenon of return migration of the Ecuadorian population, since in this case we are definitely dealing with people of Ecuadorian origin in Spain.

As can be seen in Figure 2, until the years 2005-2006 the immense majority of the population born in Ecuador had foreign nationality —mainly Ecuadorian. Gradually, there was an increase in the number of people born

in Ecuador with Spanish nationality —as a result of the process of naturalisations. After comparing and cross-checking both figures in 2013, from that year onwards there were more people born in Ecuador with Spanish nationality than with Ecuadorian nationality, exactly 264,217 for the former and 146,503 for the latter.

Source: INE.

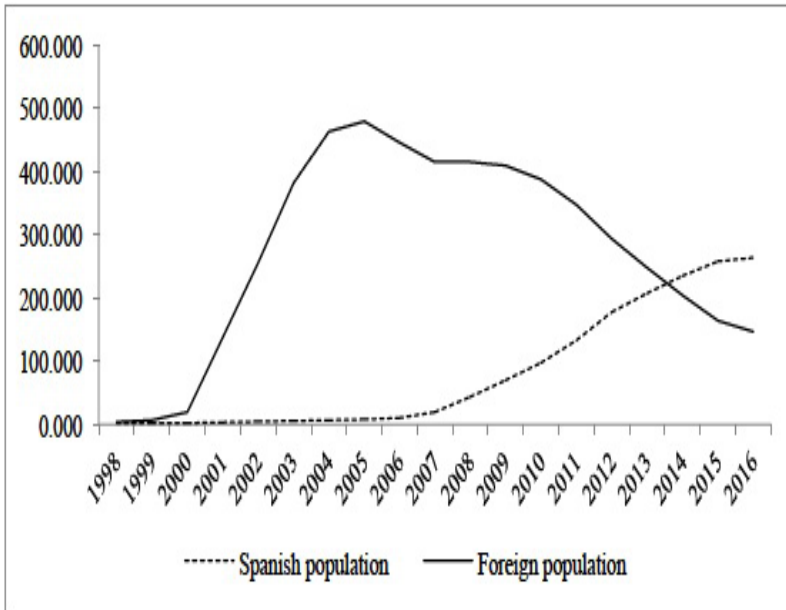


Figure 2: Evolution of the population born in Ecuador by nationality. 1998-2016

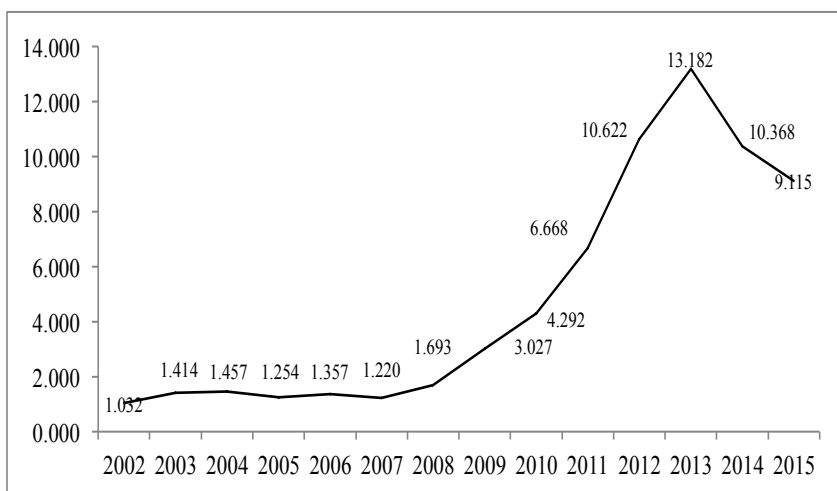
These figures confirm a tendency that we noted previously in this article: the significant fall that can be observed in the Ecuadorian foreign population in Spain is not principally due to return migration, but to the process of naturalisations that has taken place, above all from the year 2006-2007 onwards and that has continued until now.

In fact, the sum of these two figures rises in the year 2016 to 410,720 people born in Ecuador and currently resident in Spain. This total does not reach the zenith of the year 2005, with 487,239 people born in Ecuador, but it is not as distant as might be supposed if only the criterion of Spanish nationality is used. Thus, although we cannot speak of exact figures for return migration, the difference between these two figures is 76,519 people. The statistical limitations of the Census data on people resident in Spain and the difficulties in apprehending the demographic changes and movements

that are currently taking place make it advisable to contrast these data with those on residential variations. This provides us with a more precise and sharper image of the return migration of the Ecuadorian population.

As can be seen in Figure 3 the deregistrations of those departing for Ecuador increase from the year 2009, coinciding with the start of the period of economic recession in Spain. They rise in number annually to reach the figure of 13,182 deregistrations in the year 2013, to then begin a gradual fall, precisely in a socioeconomic context in which the Spanish economic conjuncture – 2014-2015 – tends to become stabilised and even improve in macroeconomic terms. During the period analysed in Figure 3 the number of departures towards Ecuador rises to 66,691, although in this case we can only differentiate between the foreign and Ecuadorian population.

**Source:** INE



**Figure 3:** Evolution of foreign deregistrations from the Census towards Ecuador. 2002-2015

In this sense, the effect of the process of naturalisations in the population of Ecuadorian origin is such that more people with Spanish nationality departed to Ecuador in the last decade than those with foreign nationality, 59.1% in the case of the former as against 40.9% in the second.

The scale of the return—or, better put, the departures—of the population of Ecuadorian origin is illustrated in Table 2, which shows deregistrations on departure to other countries by destination country. In this respect, it is striking that Ecuador is the country that is receiving the most population proceeding from Spain, 13,182 people in total.

**Table 2:** Deregistrations for departure abroad by the (10) main destination countries. 2015

	N	%
Total	427 142	100.0
Deregistration on departure to an unspecified country	198 727	46.5
Deregistration due to expiry	101 020	23.7
United Kingdom	14 329	3.4
Germany	11 802	2.8
France	11 081	2.6
United States	9 550	2.2
Ecuador	9 115	2.1
Colombia	4 880	1.1
Switzerland	4 724	1.1
Romania	4 237	1.0
Belgium	3 329	0.8
Morocco	3 223	0.8
The rest	51 125	12.0

Source: INE.

As Table 2 shows, the percentages for deregistration and departure to an unspecified foreign country and for deregistration due to expiry account for 70.2% of the total. Ecuador receives 2.1% of the total for deregistration and departure abroad and 7.2% if only deregistration where the destination country is known are taken into account. Thus, leaving aside the countries belonging to the OCDE, it receives the most important flow amongst the less developed countries. In fact, in the year 2013 it was the country that received the most departures from Spain, with a total of 2.9% of departures and 11% of those where the destination country is known.

In short, the different statistical sources give us an image in which return migration by the population of Ecuadorian origin has grown in recent years. In spite of this appreciable increase, it does not seem that this return migration has been massive. To check this hypothesis and also resolve some limitations of the statistical sources, we conducted a series of interviews in order to complete the previous information.

In this respect, a first element to highlight is that a lack of awareness can be detected about the real scale of the return. We believe it necessary to consider this aspect in greater depth to obtain a better understanding of this phenomenon and be able to respond to it. “Really, we do not know how

many people we are talking about. It is very difficult to establish programs without an exact understanding of the reality. It frequently seems we are lashing out blindly” (E1).

In spite of such doubts, the different people interviewed seem to share the idea that return migration from Spain to Ecuador is taking place mainly as a consequence of the crisis and that in many cases it is not an option that is chosen, but one that is imposed instead, which conditions the whole process considerably. As noted in the theoretical framework of this article, this vision fully matches the neoclassical theory, which focuses especially on return as an option linked to migratory failure.

“Return? Yes, this has been detected, in our province this has been detected” (E7). “Return is taking place, but in many cases it isn’t what was hoped for, the migrant returns as a loser” (E2). “Return is taking place in our municipality, the people who come to Spain come with very little capital, often with debts, so it is very difficult...” (E8).

Thus, the reality of the phenomenon of return appears to be confirmed. However, there are also several opinions that believe that it has a limited character and that in most cases return is instead a final option, against which strategies of survival and remaining in the destination country are sought to deal with the crisis and thus avoid having to return.

“Our impression is that return is not a massive option” (E3).

“Many arrive, but many also stay” (E6).

“What we are seeing is that the people of Ecuadorian origin try to hold on as long as possible here [in Spain], whatever it takes...” (E4).

“They hope that the situation in Spain will improve and they hold on until that time; if they return it is then very difficult to come back” (E2).

“There are even situations of women who prefer to go back to working as live-in domestic staff so as to save on costs” (E5).

These testimonies are also corroborated by studies of this question, such as the one prepared by the Ecuadorian Embassy in Spain that contains quotes from interviews that emphasise the same idea: “People tend to maximise things, they hear that two or three people are leaving and then think that everyone is” (Iglesias, et al., 2015: 135).

The quotations above repeat the idea that, for the population of Ecuadorian origin, return migration is not an answer to the Spanish crisis. Instead,



different survival strategies are articulated to face the crisis in the destination country, as indicated by some studies in this respect concerning the immigrant collective in general (Arango, 2012; De Lucas, 2014) and the Ecuadorian collective specifically (Iglesias *et al.*, 2014; López de Lera and Pérez-Carames, 2015).

Other factors that have an influence on non-return must be stressed. These are factors that are not only linked to the economic conjuncture, such as social and cultural rootedness in the country of origin or the opinion of the children.

“I might perhaps consider returning, but my children say no; that if I want to, I should go alone” (E5).

“Many compatriots tell me that return is not so easy, they are used to living here and they are no longer from either here or there” (E2).

Curiously, although the sample of interviews is not very wide, it seems that the perception of the scale of return migration is greater in Ecuador than in Spain. While in the interviews conducted in Spain the impression is that return flows are a merely residual quantity amongst the overall total of the population resident in Spain, for the people interviewed in Ecuador return migration is considered to be more widespread and massive. This perception could indicate that the statistical figures might be giving an underestimation of the quantity of return migration as a whole, as one author has underscored (González Ferrer, 2013). It would also be interesting to go more deeply into this aspect from a psychological and social point of view, to see what relation might be found between the perception of the problem and its real scale.

“Many returns are taking place, a lot of people, in one year in the municipality there have been requests for 113 building licences, so that those who return can construct houses” (E8).

“There are many cases of return, above all from Spain, less from the United States, people are having a bad time there” (E7).

A final aspect that emerges from the interviews and that is difficult to analyse with the statistical data available concerns departure to a third country, which in many cases appear to be countries of the European Union

where the crisis has had less impact than in Spain (Alba, Fernández and Martínez-Vega, 2013). In any case, the studies that have analysed departure to third countries indicate that, as with return migration, such flows have not been massive (Iglesias et al., 2015).

“I would even say that rather than returning, many compatriots are going to other countries of the European Union, Belgium, Holland, the United Kingdom, and even the United States” (E5).

“Spanish nationality makes it much easier to move around Europe, many are trying their luck...” (E4).

“In some cases departure to other countries of the European Union has been detected, but above all by young Ecuadorians, some of whom arrived when they were two or three years old” (E2).

In this respect we should recall that the people of Ecuadorian origin with Spanish nationality can enjoy the same facilities of movement within the European Union as any communitarian citizen.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the perception of the people interviewed largely follows the lines of the statistical evidence, which indicate that return migration has increased, but not in a massive form, and that what really gives rise to concern is not so much the quantity, but the characteristics and situation of those people who are returning.

“I wouldn’t speak so much about return migration in terms of many or a few, but instead of the situation of those who are going, many of them with big economic and housing problems” (E5).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS**

In this article we wanted to deepen understanding of the process of return migration that is taking place from Spain amongst the population of Ecuadorian origin, above all from a more quantitative perspective, referring to the size of the return flows.

In this respect, it is worth stressing that the few studies that have been done in Spain with the aim of quantifying departures abroad are not definitive and in some cases even reach divergent conclusions. We can find analyses that underline the limited character of the phenomenon (González Enríquez, 2013) and others that stress that the departures —and return migration— are proving more relevant than the official data reflect (González Ferrer, 2013).

With respect to return migration to Ecuador, both the available statistical data and the interviews conducted indicate that this is a relevant phenomenon that increased appreciably with the irruption and development of the Spanish economic crisis, resulting in Ecuador becoming the country that has received the most population from Spain in recent years.

As we noted above, it is difficult to provide an exact figure on return migration. Using the data available from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE), we can give a figure for the number of people of Ecuadorian origin that have returned of about 75,000 people, according to the calculations we were able to make in the results section.

In any case, it should be recalled that a large part of these returns take place informally, i.e. they do not make use of the official return programs and in many cases the person or family that returns does not deregister from the Census. They thus continue to appear until the biannual filtration is carried out. This fact is in part corroborated by the interviews conducted with people resident in Ecuador, which indicate that return migration is larger than what is noted by the people interviewed in Spain and the official statistical data.

We therefore believe that if we consider both the official data with their limitations and the opinions gathered in the in-depth interviews, we can estimate that the phenomenon of return migration from Spain to Ecuador can be situated in a range from 65,000 to 85,000 people. This is about 13-17% of the maximum figure for people of Ecuadorian origin resident in Spain in 2005. A significant figure but one that does not confirm the image of a massive return that has been provided by certain political organisations – in both the country of origin and the destination country – or by some mass media, as already noted by other studies made in that respect (Pajares, 2010; Peris-Mencheta, Masanet and López, 2011; López de Lera, 2012; Iglesias *et al.*, 2015).

The immense majority of the population of Ecuadorian origin chooses to continue residing in Spain and tries to cope with the crisis and the rise in unemployment by means of survival strategies. These range from reducing consumption, savings on the costs of accommodation and the search for several jobs, to greater mobility which involves moving to areas of Spain where the impact of the crisis is lower or there are more possibilities of finding work (Duque and Genta, 2009). The phenomenon of *reverse remittances* has even been noted (Sanz, 2013), which are sent by relatives resident in the country of origin to provide economic support for relatives in the destination country.

These data lead us to propose a series of reflections on the process of return migration that has been taking place in recent years from Spain to Ecuador and the public policies that have been implemented to encourage it, both by the destination country – Spain – and by the country of origin – Ecuador. The first element that must be underscored is that in view of the size of the phenomenon of return migration, it doesn't appear that these programs have been very successful, at least not if they were expected to have a massive character. Moreover, a large part of the return migratory flows have had an informal and spontaneous component.

Equally, the fact that the majority of the population of Ecuadorian origin chooses to continue residing in Spain leads to a second reflection: whether the public organisations should be developing policies of maintenance and integration in the destination country rather than return policies.

This assertion does not mean to say that the return policies are not efficient or useful. However, we believe that if they really are intended to be a tool for the economic and social development of the country of origin (Doquier, Logigiani, Rapaport and Schiff, 2009; Batista and Vicente, 2010; Tovar and Victoria, 2013), then these policies must correctly assess the size of the phenomenon and also be associated with other reception policies that facilitate the arrival and settlement of the returning population. In this sense, we consider that some of the programs that have been developed to date have not taken these aspects into account. In fact, some of the interviews that we conducted noted the shortcomings of such programs and how these lacks have meant that many of the programs have not provided an answer to the demands of people returning and those who remain in Spain.

That is why, if the aim really is to make good use of the skills and capitals acquired in the destination country by those who have returned, it is necessary to implement realistic, modest and flexible programs that can better match the reality and dimension of the phenomenon, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

### **Methodological annex. Information on the interviews**

Interview 1 (E 1). Ambassador of Ecuador in España.

Interview 2 (E 2). Academic expert from a Spanish university.

Interview 3 (E 3). Representative of Ecuadorian Embassy in España.

Interview 4 (E 4). Journalist specialising in Migrations. Former specialist of the SENAMI in Spain.

Interview 5 (E 5). President of the Rumiñauhi Association of Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain.

Interview 6 (E 6). Specialist of the Vice-ministry of Human Mobility (Ecuador).

Interview 7 (E 7). Representative of the Interinstitutional Network of Human Mobility of Chimborazo (Ecuador).

Interview 8 (E 8). Former Mayor of the municipality of Chunchi (Ecuador).

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## **CURRICULAR INFORMATION OF THE AUTHORS**

### *Gorka Moreno Márquez*

Es Investigador Prometeo en la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo (Ecuador) y Director del Observatorio Vasco de Inmigración en la Universidad del País Vasco (España). Publicaciones: Moreno, Gorka y Aierdi, Xabier (2016), “The impact of the crisis on homelessness in Spain: Social intervention in a context of greater need and fewer resources”, en *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 19, núm. 1, pp. 31-45 y Martínez de Lizarrondo, Antidio; Rinken, Sebastian; Godenau, Dirk y Moreno, Gorka (2016), “La integración del colectivo inmigrante en las regiones españolas”, en *Papers*, vol. 101, núm. 3, pp. 189-313.

Dirección electrónica: [gorka.moreno@ehu.es](mailto:gorka.moreno@ehu.es)

### *José Álvarez Román*

Profesor e investigador en la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo (Ecuador) y Director de Vinculación con la Sociedad en la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo (Ecuador). Publicaciones: Álvarez, José; Moreno, Gorka; Acevedo, Adolfo (2014), “Migración interna en la ciudad de Riobamba-Ecuador. Periodo 2000-2010”, VII. *Simposio Internacional de Ingeniería Industrial: Actualidad y nuevas tenencias 2014* (Libro de Actas), Universidad Nacional Mayor San Marcos, Lima y Álvarez, José (2010), *Migración interna de Riobamba. Diagnóstico situacional de la Migración interna en la ciudad de Riobamba*, RIMHUCH, Riobamba.

Dirección electrónica: [jalvarez@unach.edu.ec](mailto:jalvarez@unach.edu.ec)