



Amid Economic Woes, Argentina Reconsiders Its Immigrant-Friendly Stance

The Editors | Wednesday, Dec. 12, 2018

Editor's Note: This article is part of an ongoing series (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/series/26/immigration-and-integration-policy>) on immigration and integration policy around the world.

Argentina has long been a welcoming destination for generations of immigrants, but in recent years, xenophobic and discriminatory sentiments have risen in visibility amid a severe economic crisis. The administration of President Mauricio Macri has responded by placing some curbs (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/americas/argentinas-trump-like-immigration-order-rattles-south-america.html>) on immigration, although their impacts have so far been limited. In an interview with WPR, Guillermo Cantor, research director at the American Immigration Council, discusses Argentina's history as a regional hub for immigration and the factors that are now causing some Argentines to think twice about welcoming more immigrants.

World Politics Review: What are the cultural, historical and economic factors that have historically led Argentina to serve as a regional hub for immigration?

Guillermo Cantor: For much of its modern history, Argentina has been predominantly an immigrant-receiving country and, like the United States, is often portrayed as a nation of immigrants. This perception stems primarily from the striking growth of the country's population that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During that period, successive governments encouraged immigration, from Europe specifically, to populate and develop the country's vast territory and to foster agricultural and cattle production.

In the mid-19th century, at a time when the nation-state was still forming, some of Argentina's most prominent intellectual and political leaders believed that increasing the size of the population was a requirement for the nation's progress. This vision is perhaps best captured in the now-famous expression "to govern is to populate," coined by Juan Bautista Alberdi, a prominent jurist and political theorist whose



A protester holds a sign reading in Spanish "Dignity has no passport, rights have no nationality," during a demonstration in Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 30, 2017 (AP photo by Natacha Pisarenko).

writings shaped the country's constitution and immigration policies.

The government's proactive efforts to attract European immigrants coincided with the rise of mass emigration from Europe to the New World. Demographic, economic, and social push factors prompted millions of migrants to leave Europe. They were abandoning countries with abundant labor and low standards of living to seek a better life in countries with scarce labor and higher living standards. By 1913, Argentina ranked among the 10 richest countries in the world, ahead of France, Germany and Italy, making it an attractive destination. Once large-scale migration got started, earlier migrants' relatives and friends became more likely to join them later on, creating a snowball effect.

While Argentina has idealized its European immigrant past, immigration from neighboring countries has been traditionally portrayed as less desirable. In fact, during the second half of the 20th century, immigration policy was based on a dominant perception of European migration as a symbol of development and civilization and of Latin American migration as invasive and burdensome. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the majority of immigrants to Argentina did not come from Europe, but from neighboring countries. These immigrants were fleeing economic difficulties back home and entering Argentina at a time when it was perceived to be a more prosperous country in the region. This trend intensified in the 1990s, when the Argentine economy stabilized and the Argentine peso traded on a one-to-one basis with the U.S. dollar.

However, the increasingly restrictive immigration norms implemented since the 1960s, and particularly during the 1980s, provided few opportunities for undocumented immigrants to regularize and become fully integrated into the economic and social fabric of the country. The last military government, for example, implemented a law in 1981 that denied undocumented immigrants the right to work and access health care services and education. Between 1980 and 1991, the percentage (http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/pdf_varios/estadisticas/Censos.pdf) of foreign-born individuals decreased from 6.8 percent to 5 percent, and the percentage of those from neighboring countries went from 2.7 to 2.6 percent.

More recently, a new migration law was adopted in 2003, which, among other things, required the government to adopt and implement regulations to formalize the legal status of foreigners. Unfortunately, such regulations were not implemented for another three years, at which point a legalization program (<https://www.oas.org/dil/Migrants/Argentina/Disposici%97n%20N%20A1%2053.253%20del%202005.pdf>) known as *Patria Grande* went into effect. The program was designed to grant legal status to undocumented immigrants from member states or associated states of the Mercosur trade bloc. The requirements for the multi-step legalization process were fairly simple. For the first step, applicants had to present proof of identity and nationality and fill out an application form. Upon obtaining "precarious" residence, applicants could apply for permanent residence after presenting a clean criminal record and paying a fee. Under this program, more than 423,000 (http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/pdf_varios/estadisticas/Patria_Grande.pdf) individuals had applied for

legal status by 2008 and of those, about 53 percent received temporary or permanent residence.

WPR: Have Argentina's integration policies been sufficient to meet the needs of new arrivals? What more can be done in this regard?

Cantor: Argentina does not have policies specifically designed to integrate immigrants, such as the ones that many countries in Western Europe have. However, immigrants benefit from a number of public services that in other countries are difficult or cost-prohibitive to access. The migration law (http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/pdf_varios/campana_grafica/pdf/Libro_Ley_25.871.pdf) passed by Congress in 2003 explicitly grants immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, access to health care in public hospitals and free public education, including at the university level. It also provides noncitizens who lack sufficient financial resources with free legal representation. These provisions are based on a human rights framework that did away with restrictions enacted under the preceding military regime.

Perhaps one of the most powerful tools for integration, though, is the range of socioeconomic opportunities that were opened up for immigrants under the 2003 law and the subsequent Patria Grande program. This enabled formerly undocumented immigrants to join the formal economy, thus reducing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Finally, for immigrants from most countries in Latin America, language and cultural barriers are less of an issue than they are for many immigrants in other parts of the world. But, in any event, the 2003 law also requires the government to provide Spanish language courses in schools and cultural institutions.

WPR: How have Argentines' attitudes toward foreigners evolved over the years? To what extent are we now seeing a shift in the country's immigrant-friendly stance under Macri?

Cantor: In recent decades, new immigrants from neighboring countries often encountered various discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes and practices. These sentiments are routinely reported both in the media and in academic papers. At different points in time, public officials, the media and unions blamed immigrants for increasing crime and unemployment rates.

But where is this anti-immigrant sentiment coming from? A few years ago, I conducted research (<https://www.editorialteseo.com/archivos/10875/quin-est-en-contra-de-la-inmigracin-en-la-argentina-contemporanea-intereses-y-valores-en-las-actitudes-de-la-poblacin-hacia-la-inmigracin/>) on this issue using data from the World Values Survey and found that four out of 10 individuals favored restrictive immigration policies. Restrictive attitudes were mostly associated with cultural factors such as prejudice, nationalism or xenophobia; certain ideological views; lower levels of satisfaction with one's life; and distrust of others, including persons of other nationalities.

Anti-immigrant sentiments tend to be exacerbated during periods of economic downturn. Argentina is

now undergoing a serious economic crisis, with rising consumer prices and high unemployment, so those anti-immigrant sentiments have started to gain increased visibility in the media.

The Macri administration has made immigration enforcement a priority and is in the process of implementing some new policies, including increased border enforcement, the immediate removal of immigrants who commit crimes, and the creation of a new immigration court and a new police force that will be in charge of immigration enforcement. At the same time, it would be an oversimplification to deem Macri's approach to immigration as restrictionist. Notably, during the first two years of his administration, approximately 430,000 (http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/pdf_varios/estadisticas/radicaciones_resueltas_2017.pdf) foreign-born individuals were granted permanent or temporary residence, and this trend shows no sign of slowing down.

© 2018, World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.