

## Closeness and Distance in Transnational Politics: The Bolivian MAS-IPSP in Argentina in 2020

### Cercanías y distancias en la política transnacional: el MAS-IPSP boliviano en Argentina en 2020

Federico Rodrigo<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the formation of the MAS-IPSP in Argentina and the impact on its militancy of the arrival of top leaders of that party after the resignation of Evo Morales from the presidency of Bolivia in November 2019. Through participant observations and interviews, it is acknowledged that the proximity experienced between diaspora activists and party leaders is a relevant dimension of this process. In particular, it notices that the proximity not only favored the simultaneity in the belonging and participation of migrants in the political fields of both countries, but also enhanced their interpenetration. In this way, the originality of the work is given by the identification of a decisive factor in the conformation and development of transnational political collectives and their forms of operation that has been little dealt with in the literature.

*Keywords:* 1. transnationalism, 2. politics, 3. proximity, 4. Bolivia, 5. Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

#### RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza la conformación del MAS-IPSP en Argentina y el impacto en su militancia de la llegada de dirigentes de máxima relevancia de ese partido luego de la renuncia de Evo Morales a la presidencia de Bolivia en noviembre de 2019. Por medio de observaciones participantes y entrevistas, se reconoce que la proximidad experimentada entre los/as activistas de la diáspora y los/as referentes partidarios es una dimensión relevante de este proceso. En particular, se encuentra que la cercanía no solo favoreció la simultaneidad en la pertenencia y la participación de los/as migrantes en los campos políticos de ambos países, sino que potenció su interpenetración. De esta manera, la originalidad del trabajo está dada por la identificación de un factor decisivo en la conformación y en el desarrollo de los colectivos políticos transnacionales y sus formas de funcionamiento poco tratado por la bibliografía.

*Palabras clave:* 1. transnacionalismo, 2. política, 3. proximidad, 4. Bolivia, 5. Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires.

Date received: December 20, 2022

Date accepted: January 24, 2024

Published online: November 15, 2024

Translation (English) published online: November 15, 2024

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<sup>1</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Sociales-Conicet, Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, and Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, Argentina, [federodrigo@gmail.com](mailto:federodrigo@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3938-8132>



## INTRODUCTION

In November 2019, in the context of a broad political crisis whose assessment still raises controversies in the academic field (Claros, 2022), Evo Morales was forced to resign from the presidency of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and, fearing some kind of retaliation from the new authorities, he escaped to Mexico. After staying there for a few weeks, in December of that same year, the new Argentinian government granted him asylum and facilitated the conditions for him to settle near the City of Buenos Aires.

Although the case of the former president received the most media attention and concentrated the official work of the receiving State, he was not the only leader of the Movimiento Al Socialismo-Instrumento Para la Soberanía de los Pueblos (MAS-IPSP) (Movement for Socialism-Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples) who arrived in Argentina. Many other leaders and officials of different relevance (approximately 70) arrived in the Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires (AMBA) (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area) thanks to political ties and family and compatriotism networks, to seek shelter, according to the testimonies collected. As such, a very large group of leaders was formed, referred to as members of the “Evo cabinet” by the activists already settled in Argentina.

Argentina is the main destination for emigrants from Bolivia and, since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of them have been concentrated in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Benencia & Karasik, 1994). Although there are records of previous organizations, as will be explained later, from 1980 onwards a much more intense associative dynamic consolidated among migrants, which then in the 21<sup>st</sup> century began to shape into political-party articulations.

In this way, even in the context of personal anxiety and distress over the news received, those who arrived in 2020 for political reasons quickly began to organize themselves in their new destination. Immediately after settling in Buenos Aires, Morales began meeting with Argentinian political leaders, with recently arrived Bolivians, and with previously settled migrants who, since 2013, had formed MAS-IPSP political committees there. Soccer games that, once over, turned into meetings with a large number of participants (Infobae, 2019), as well as events to which the president was invited by local groups (Dario, 2020), were spaces for sociability and organization in which proselytizing actions were coordinated in the first months of 2020.

This is how a political plot of absolute relevance formed around the figure of the former president. The meetings and activities that were carried out, initially to denounce different crimes committed by the government of Jeanine Áñez and, later, for electoral purposes, became areas of visibility and positioning and, therefore, ways of accessing decision-making spheres.

Although different regions in the AMBA were already part of certain conflicts and mobilization dynamics in Bolivia, as will be explained later, the displacements at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 modified the logic and constitutive spaces of the MAS-IPSP. Of course, a considerable part of the leadership stayed in Bolivia and carried out numerous actions and instances of confrontation and negotiation with the authorities. Still, due to the unavoidable relevance of Morales and the

number and hierarchy of leaders and former officials who gathered around him in Argentina, the party map underwent a significant transformation. It has even been pointed out that Luis Arce Catacora was selected as the presidential candidate for the October 2020 elections from Buenos Aires, leaving aside other important figures such as former foreign minister David Choquehuanca Céspedes, who ultimately became the vice-presidential candidate (Molina, 2022).

The victory in these elections and Arce's assumption of the presidency ended this stage and marked the return to their country of many of those who had left. It is evident that the 12 months between November 2019 and 2020 are exceptional in the history of Bolivian politics in Argentina, marked as they were by the fall of the MAS-IPSP government, as well as by the COVID-19 pandemic. The characteristics of that period, however, are especially interesting for analyzing some central dynamics of transnational activism.

One of the recurring concerns in the field of studies on transnational political processes is the relationships that groups of emigrant activists keep with members of the diaspora and, especially, with central party authorities. Studies that reconstruct the motivations of migrants to get involved in politics in their place of origin stand out (Faist, 2010; Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Waldinger, 2013), as well as the motivations of political organizations to deploy *extraterritorial* campaigns (Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2018; Smith, 2008; Vilches Hinojosa & Aguilar López, 2022). The dynamics of the creation and forms of organization of groups abroad and their capacity to define their operating logics and activities were also addressed (Canelo, 2016; Canelo et al., 2012; Goldring, 2004; Hinojosa Gordonava et al., 2012; Merenson, 2021; Olson, 2009). These studies evidence that the investigation into the constitution and development of these relations is a key element in understanding the political fields and the logic of belonging and citizenship.

Following this agenda, the aim is to explore different elements of transnationalism through the analysis of the formation of the MAS-IPSP in Argentina and of the impact of the arrival of highly relevant Bolivian leaders on the networks that constitute it. Within the broad spectrum of spaces established in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, this analysis focuses on the path of the Political Committee established in 2013 in the city of La Plata,<sup>2</sup> which underwent a major reorganization in this period.

The main contribution of this study is identifying the proximity to the symbolic center of the MAS-IPSP as a relevant dimension to take into account in the formation and development of transnational political fields. This formulation is based on the analysis of a process in which two key moments stand out.

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<sup>2</sup> La Plata is the capital city of the Province of Buenos Aires, located 50 kilometers south of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. The most recent official population data from 2010 reported a population of 740 000 inhabitants, with 6% of foreigners, among whom the most notable in number are people from Paraguay, Bolivia, and Peru.

The first one is the inauguration of Vice-Consulates of the Plurinational State of Bolivia—with the consequent permanent establishment of vice-consuls—in the region, and the visits of party leaders who were key in the creation of the committees here. Then, the establishment of referents between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 in the AMBA, which impacted in two different ways that enhanced the interpenetration of the political fields of both countries. On the one hand, the presence of these leaders favored the involvement in the Bolivian campaign of organizations in the context of arrival, as these leaders assumed commitments with the “Evo cabinet” (materialized through economic resources and militant work) of a magnitude unprecedented to that time. On the other hand, the intermediation of those who arrived weakened certain distinctions between participation *for Bolivia* or *for Argentina*, which had been considered exclusive by MAS activism in previous campaigns. Thus, *simultaneity* (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) in belonging and commitment became a capital, and *double* militancy grew strong.

In recent decades, the necessity to understand space as a sphere of encounter between different trajectories, an area of relations that simultaneously emerges from connections and makes them possible (Massey, 2012) has been pointed out. In a call not to subscribe oneself to essentialist senses of what a place is, here it is proposed that mobility and routes are not secondary or ulterior phenomena to a place, but rather constitutive elements of it (Ingold, 2015).

This emphasis on relations has been present from the onset of the sociological reflection on this issue. Simmel showed that the key to understanding this dimension of experience is not in the physical space *between* subjects, but in the links and connections that take place *through* such space (Simmel, 2016). In line with this, Park (1999) pointed out that contiguity is insufficient to guarantee the integration of a heterogeneous group, highlighting the gaps between social and spatial distance. These authors made it possible to understand that, to the extent that the use made of space is cultural, its assessment within the framework of an interaction or a relationship varies culturally (Hall, 2003). In this way, when distance is understood in sociocultural terms, it is not reduced to a quantitative parameter, to a certain number of kilometers that separate people and groups, but rather results from the relational logic that connects them, which involves variable combinations of different forms of connection and which can pertain different subjects and mediating mechanisms.

On the other hand, the fact that geographical separations are socially and culturally constructed does not imply their harmlessness, but rather the need to specify, to situate their effectiveness. Ginzburg highlighted the complex relationships between feelings and temporal and spatial distance that have permeated Western philosophy and social thought throughout history, in turn linked to the assumption of moral commitments of a general (universal) or particular type. Thus, the development of technical mechanisms and relational configurations able to produce closeness (such as the integration of the world through trade) or distance (such as bureaucratic administration techniques or military technologies) have been part of the emergence of moral commitments between diverse population groups, as well as of the renunciation or disregard for such responsibilities (Ginzburg, 2000).

In relation to the production and sustenance of connections between people, it is important to take into account that despite the development of other forms of communication, moments of physical proximity continue to occupy a relevant place in different aspects of social life (Urry, 2002). Even in the development of forms of localized transnationalism, produced by groups that keep strong ties with their communities of origin but for various reasons cannot visit them, the importance of certain personalities—such as religious leaders—is evident, as they through their geographical mobility are key in the construction of diverse relationships with the homeland (Sobczyk et al., 2020).

In turn, the recent transgressions against and discussions about confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that, crossed in different ways by differences and inequalities of class, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, race, etc., physical co-presence remains a fundamental pillar in the construction of multiple modes of sociability, an irreplaceable one to a certain extent (at least for now) (Martuccelli, 2021).

In this regard, Urry (2002) pointed out how necessary it is to recognize the forms of intersection of the mobility of people, objects, and discourses that contingently and complexly link subjects in patterns of obligation, desire, and commitment, over variable geographical distances. Thus, social relations always imply combinations of proximity and distance that are configured by means of diverse elements.

Following these contributions, it becomes clear that the territory of Bolivian politics does not match that of Bolivia, but is articulated in multiple locations from which State and civil actors, Bolivian and of other nationalities, participate and constitute this sphere of interaction. Such interconnections are organized around certain geographical references, but authority and prestige can shift and transform the linking dynamics that contain them. Thus, feeling close or far from Evo Morales and other figures of the MAS-IPSP profoundly alters the meanings, forms, and career possibilities of party membership. And this proximity was especially constituted, at least in this case, through the physical co-presence of key actors.

#### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The data presented in this paper are the result of a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), developed since 2013 in different locations in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, which included participant observations at events, activities, and meetings promoted by the Consulate General of the Plurinational State of Bolivia in Argentina and the Vice Consulate of La Plata, and/or by migrant organizations from Bolivia, which was part of different investigations: the conformation of Bolivian transnational State entities in this area of Argentina was analyzed (Rodrigo, 2019a), different transnational political dynamics that included political-partisan activity (Rodrigo, 2019b), and the relationships that Argentine organizations and politicians establish with Bolivian officials and activists.

Thus, the author attended the official celebrations of the Independence of Bolivia and the Day of the Sea; was present at the opening of the Campaign Houses of the Movement for Socialism-

Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples in different neighborhoods on the outskirts of La Plata, and at events of the same political party in the town of La Matanza in 2014, as well as in the City of Buenos Aires in the framework of the campaigns for the Bolivian elections of 2014 and 2019.

Likewise, during these electoral periods, meetings were observed at the Vice Consulate, as well as other activities developed by the associations of the community. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted and informal dialogues were held with nine leaders and members of the Political Committee of the MAS-IPSP of the city, with consular authorities (the vice-consul and consular assistant of La Plata, as well as the consul and deputy consul of the Consulate General), with political and union leaders, and with Argentinian officials who keep links with them. All these interviews were conducted face-to-face.

On the other hand, at the end of 2019, the author was present at various activities carried out in the city in rejection of what activists considered a *coup d'état* against Evo Morales,<sup>3</sup> such as a mobilization to the main square in November, and events carried out in coordination with political and union groups in December.

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions established by health authorities in the face of it altered the political work of these subjects, but did not stop it. Following their initiatives, the author participated in virtual meetings of the former president and some of his collaborators with groups of migrants, organized by Argentinian institutions and Bolivian leaders, as well as in different proselytizing actions within the framework of the campaign for the elections in October 2020, such as car caravans and an event in Barrio Futuro, on the western outskirts of the city. In these face-to-face activities, informal conversations were held with various activists, including those from the “Evo cabinet.” On election day, meanwhile, observations were made in two of the schools in La Plata that were fitted out for voting.

After the electoral process, the author’s link with the Political Committee of the MAS-IPSP of La Plata continued during its process of authority succession, so he participated in the internal elections and, then, in January 2021, six of the members of the new board of directors were interviewed; five of them face-to-face, and one virtually.

These approaches and the review of academic bibliography and public documentation allowed this author to reconstruct and explain a dynamic process of articulation of Bolivian politics in this region of Argentina. It can be started by mentioning the emergence of political activities of migrants settled in Argentina in recent decades.

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the debates surrounding the crisis process and the resignation of Evo Morales from the presidency of Bolivia, see Claros and Díaz Cuéllar, (2022), and Molina, (2022).

## POLITICIZATION OF THE DIASPORA AND POLITICAL DIASPORIZATION

At least since the late 1960s, there have been associations and entities of Bolivian nationals in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Benencia & Karasik, 1994; Caggiano, 2005; Gavazzo, 2004; Giorgis, 2004; Grimson, 1999). Neighborhoods with a significant density of migrants gradually formed, and numerous events (festivities, sports championships, radio programs, and events where groups of typical Bolivian music and dance are exhibited) began to take place in different spaces, forming a circuit from which an *imagined community* is collectively constituted (Anderson, 2007).

Although there are clear antecedents to the constitution of transnational political networks involving Bolivians in Argentina throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and, in South America, the politicization of migration and political exile can be traced back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bergel, 2015; Merenson, 2021)—the most relevant activities that were part of their process of public visibility revolved around music, dance, and gastronomy. These types of practices led Grimson (1999) to conceptualize their forms of belonging as *ethnic-national*, thus highlighting processes of national affiliation developed *from below*, without direct participation of State agencies, and not seeking to challenge their institutions.

This situation began to change in the early 2000s, when the protests in Buenos Aires in support of the demonstrations known as the *gas war*<sup>4</sup> revealed the links between the community networks in this region and different political expressions in their country of origin. The demand for voting from abroad represented another relevant moment in the establishment of a transnational political agenda (and a network of political relations). In 2003, the Comisión Internacional del Voto Boliviano (International Commission for Bolivian Voting Abroad) was established in Buenos Aires, seeking to demand the approval of a law regulating this right, enshrined in the Electoral Code of 1991 yet never implemented.<sup>5</sup> In turn, from 2006 on, when Evo Morales became president, the links of migrants with the State took on new forms.

The consolidation in Bolivia of a multi-sector alliance of political, trade union, indigenous, and peasant organizations created a new power bloc that transformed the national imaginary and the place of the popular, peasant, and indigenous sectors within it, and characterized the transformations carried out by the MAS-IPSP as a *decolonization* process (García Linera, 2008; González Piñeros, 2011; Prada Alcoreza, 2010; Schavelzon, 2015). The government granted a symbolic place of relevance to emigrants and implemented different acknowledgement measures such as automatic

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<sup>4</sup>The conflict known as the gas war arose in October 2003, after the Bolivian government's decision to export natural gas to Chile. Various demonstrations and confrontations with police authorities, whose epicenter was the city of El Alto, took place with the intention of claiming the privilege of the internal market and questioning the prices agreed with the neighboring country.

<sup>5</sup>In 2005, the Superior Court of Justice of La Paz ordered the sanctioning of a regulation in this same sense, declaring admissible the request of a Bolivian citizen settled in Argentina who requested to exercise his right to vote in the presidential elections of his country of origin.

nationality (Caggiano, 2019), the strengthening of consular institutions (Rodrigo, 2019a), and the vote from abroad (Canelo, 2016; Canelo et al., 2012; Hinojosa Gordonava et al., 2012).

In 2008, the MAS-IPSP approved the bill to regulate voting from abroad in the Chamber of Deputies, but the opposition managed to stop its progress in the Senate. In this context, different demonstrations were held in different cities in Argentina to demand its implementation (Domenech & Hinojosa Gordonava, 2009). The symbolic *voting day* held in different Argentinian towns on August 10, 2008, when the Recall Referendum was taking place in Bolivia, stands out in terms of this, as does the organization of a massive march in Buenos Aires on October 21 of that same year, simultaneously with a mobilization called in La Paz to demand constitutional reform. Finally, with the approval of the new Constitution in January 2009, the right to vote of Bolivians residing outside the national territory was also approved. In this way, “the new balance of power between citizens abroad, the Government, and other Bolivian domestic actors is partially reflected” (Hinojosa Gordonava et al., 2012, p. 42).

The redefinition of the field of dialogue that constitutes the nation and the acknowledgement of emigrants allowed the MAS-IPSP to build a support base outside the borders of Bolivia, which manifested itself in activities of various kinds; fundamentally, in a massive following of the electoral process. In Argentina, the country where the largest number of Bolivian migrants settle and the largest number of people eligible to vote abroad are concentrated, the registered voters grew progressively from almost 90 000 in 2009 to around 161 000 in 2019. Here, Evo Morales obtained more than 85% of the votes cast in all elections.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a politicization dynamic of part of the Bolivian diaspora was articulated with important expressions in the AMBA or, in other words, a progressive political diasporization around the figure of Evo Morales took place.

#### THE FORMATION OF THE MAS-IPSP IN ARGENTINA

The increase of consular presence in the AMBA was a relevant part of a process of transformation of some of the diasporization dynamics of the Bolivian population settled in the region, in which the formation of transnational political forces that mobilized for proselytizing purposes in the elections of 2014, 2019, and 2020 stands out.

In 2013, three Vice Consulates were created in the towns of La Plata, La Matanza, and Pilar, dependent on the Consulate General located in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. In addition to providing facilities for carrying out different procedures (such as identity cards, registrations, certifications, passports, safe-conduct passes, letters, etc.) and exercising official representation of migrants before State institutions in contexts of arrival under different circumstances, they also promoted a process of institutionalization of the MAS-IPSP in this region and of a very significant increase in its public presence. Taking into account that the creation of political committees

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<sup>6</sup> The increase in the number of registered voters was not followed by a similar percentage of growth in votes cast, which increased in a much more moderate way. This is because many of the newly registered voters did not exercise their right to vote.



followed diverse paths in the different cities, it is possible to identify in the constitution of the La Plata Committee some dynamics that are common to the rest of the spaces of this party in the AMBA.

Transnational politics usually implies certain forms of territorial mobility. Representatives from the country of origin who visit the groups abroad and/or migrants who return to build, sustain, or strengthen connections with people who stayed there are important in establishing cross-border relations. In this last sense, some of the activists settled in La Plata, in addition to contact through different media, maintained links with members of communal unions belonging to the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB) (Unified Syndical Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia)—from different areas in the departments of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz—, of which they had been part before their arrival in Argentina. In certain cases, compatriot or family relations with officials at different governmental levels stood out, but these had not led to the consolidation of a MAS-IPSP collective in La Plata. This issue was transformed with the opening of the consular agency in the city.

As a representative of the Evo Morales government, the vice-consul played a central role in the configuration of the Local Political Committee. His State position gave him the necessary legitimacy to mobilize different actors in order to consolidate the collective. As already highlighted, public activities in destination contexts that include figures from the migrants' countries of origin, as well as small meetings organized with representatives of a diaspora in a locality or region, are fundamental in the production of the transnational activist connection (Lafleur, 2012). In these, the subjects feel involved with the partisan needs and, when the collectives occupy government positions, as in the case of MAS-IPSP, also with the State institutions of origin and the policies they implement. In this way, commitments are produced and strengthened (Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2018).

In this same sense, another fundamental element in the process of forming the committees was the organization of visits by political leaders and/or officials of the Bolivian government to the different cities of the AMBA. The arrival of the president himself, the vice president, ministers, legislators, and leaders preceded the inauguration of the consular representations. However, since they were created, the officials of the diplomatic service were able to have a relative influence on the organization of their agenda and, especially, were able to concentrate the communication of the events.

In this sense, Hipólito, a representative of an organization of horticultural producers of the city (the Moto Méndez Cooperative, in the Evita Agrarian Front) that was part of the process of creating the Committee, comments the following in an interview conducted at the beginning of 2015 in relation to a visit received the year prior:

After what Evo Morales transmitted and the presence of the comrade in the neighborhoods, that was very important. Her presence, not telling the story as we tell it, convincing them of the project, but because she lived it, because she was part of the creation of that policy,

because she defended it against the right wing from there (Hipólito, personal communication, February 11, 2015).

In light of the objectives of this article, the visit to the area in June 2014 by the alternate senator and secretary of International Relations of the MAS-IPSP, Leonilda Zurita, is especially relevant. Her itinerary was important because ceremonies for the designation of party delegates took place during the activities she carried out in different neighborhoods of the AMBA. Otherwise said, the visit of the Bolivian leader allowed the institutionalization of transnational political committees, which were formed by those who were officially designated by her.

Fieldwork in the city of La Plata allowed to recognize that these events generated strong disputes among Bolivian leaders settled in the city, in terms of which places the leader would visit and who would be appointed (Rodrigo, 2019b). In this scenario, the vice-consul of the city tried to mediate the counterpoints and resolve the debates when there was no consensus.

Another mechanism that allowed consular institutions to organize groups of militants is the control that foreign service officials have over the appointment of party delegates. This is possible because, outside of Bolivian territory, the registration of observers and prosecutors, as well as their official certification, are carried out through diplomatic offices. Therefore, by concentrating the distribution of official credentials, especially necessary at the polling stations on election days, the consular authorities held a central position since the very formation of the MAS-IPSP in Argentina in the definition of its members and in the division of tasks to guarantee electoral work.

In La Plata, the Committee's direction was formed by members of different associations with diverse backgrounds in ethnic activism. Its formal composition varied, but it always had around 30 members belonging to nine organizations. The heterogeneity of their agendas, connections, and activities makes a brief summary difficult, but one notable element is that, except for the representative of the only entity of horticultural producers (part of the Peronist-oriented Evita Movement), the rest of the members did not develop a political militancy in Argentina.

This distinction should not be interpreted as a sharp division between the political fields of both countries. On the contrary, Bolivian political territoriality in the AMBA was constituted by including the participation of different actors. In this sense, the different electoral campaigns led by the Committee involved Argentinian organizations and institutions. Matter of fact, different faculties of the National University of La Plata hosted events; the National Institute of Agricultural Technology and various municipalities in the area provided resources for different actions (in coordination with the Vice Consulate) and facilitated the implementation of proselytizing activities, among other support. For its part, the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (Argentine Workers' Central Union) and several groups linked to Peronism and left-wing groups participated in a number of events and coordinated strategies with Bolivian activists to call their constituencies to vote for the MAS-IPSP.

These collaborations took place within the framework of internal tensions in the Committee, and saw the link with Argentinian organizations as the most recurrent controversy in this space

(Rodrigo, 2019b). This issue became particularly evident with registration of new militants, even when many of the first members kept contact with diverse groups. The recruitment of new activists was concentrated in migrant organizations, relegating at first the Bolivians who carried out their political work in collectives focused on the context or arrival. They were invited to collaborate, but their involvement was limited to the possibility of organic participation in the Committee.

The activists who most strongly defended this position expressed concern for keeping the MAS-IPSP a *community*. Thus they qualified their aim of exclusively representing the interests of the Bolivians settled in the city, without allowing the involvement of other kinds of motivations and objectives. Pertaining this, Francisco, a representative of the Barrio Cochabamba organization on the western outskirts of La Plata, told in an interview conducted in the winter of 2014, in relation to his attempt to join the committee of an association called Arriba Bolivia, linked at that time to the municipal mayor, about the way in which he perceived the Justicialist party:

We don't let them in, we stop them completely. Wherever there is organization, they always try to get in [referring to Argentinian political parties]. Where there is organization, they want to take over, or somehow buy it so that it becomes part of them (...) We are going to respect it, the MAS-IPSP is a community organization, we are only going to support Evo, organically, because we were very marginalized (Francisco, personal communication, June 6, 2014).

On the other hand, the party formation took place in this first period following quite strictly some formally established protocols, and the possibilities of participating in decision-making spaces with voice and vote were limited to those who had been designated in accordance with such procedures. On the other hand, the opening of spaces such as the so-called *Campaign Houses*, which operated within the framework of the 2014 and 2019 elections, also required a formal designation.

Both campaigns were pushed forward primarily from the work that each organization or referential member of the Committee carried out in their networks and spaces of belonging and participation. Although some graphic materials were distributed through the Vice Consulate, and various communication products produced by the central command in Bolivia were published through WhatsApp and Facebook, which the militants could in turn share, most of the work was carried out in a decentralized and autonomous manner. Beyond some coordinated acts between the different political committees of the AMBA and some car caravans and inaugurations of party offices in La Plata, each group defined its own strategy, which in turn led to a certain competition between the different spaces. Thus, transnational politics continued a logic of distinction and dispute that has crossed the organizations of the Bolivian community in recent decades (Caggiano, 2005).

In short, various processes converged for a transformation of the ways of conformation and connection that the Bolivian community acquired in the area. The prestige that Evo Morales gained and the modification of the consular policy positioned the diasporic bureaucracy in a relevant place in these plots, and partially restored the link between national affiliations and the State. This

dynamic, in turn, was crossed—and partly caused—by transnational partisan activity, positioning the MAS-IPSP in a relevant space in diasporization processes.

#### THE “EVO CABINET” AND ARGENTINIAN ORGANIZATIONS IN THE 2020 CAMPAIGN

The situation that detonated the conflict around the electoral results of October 2019 in Bolivia and the subsequent resignation of the then president strongly transformed this dynamic. In this framework, MAS militants in Argentina began to look for forms of organization and mobilization; first, in support of the Morales government and, later, in repudiation of the actions carried out by his replacement, Jeanine Áñez. Thus, calls were issued in different Argentinian cities (Ámbito Financiero, 2019), including La Plata (Agencia Nova, 2019).

Especially from the beginning of 2020, when many members of the “Evo cabinet” had already settled in the AMBA, the MAS-IPSP in Argentina transformed its forms of organization and operation. In the context of the Bolivian political crisis, the consular staff was replaced by other representatives who supported the new government. For this reason, the connections between the political networks of the leaders who arrived from Bolivia and the militancy already established in Argentina could not follow the usual channels, a fact that motivated the creation of new channels and the repurposing of other pre-existing ones.

The nucleus of those who arrived defined a territorial division and established individuals in charge for each of the sections. The first task faced by the leaders of these *campaign boards* was to incorporate the nuclei of MAS-IPSP activists in Argentina into the outlined strategies. La Plata was integrated into the southern conurbation (which included the municipalities of Quilmes, Berazategui, Florencio Varela, Almirante Brown, Ensenada, and Berisso), which had as its main coordinators Jonathan Marquina (Deputy Minister of National Health until Evo Morales’ resignation) and Orlando Pozo (former senator for Santa Cruz).

Unlike political committee militants, many of the new arrivals had held important legislative and/or executive positions and performed tasks reserved for hierarchical cadres. This condition, which is a fundamental element of the symbolic capital they hold and which, as mentioned with respect to Leonilda Zurita’s visit in 2014, was a resource mobilized in the constitution of the party in the region, marked the dynamics acquired by the 2020 electoral campaign.

Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei (2018) analyzed the motivations of political parties for their extraterritorial formation, following a cost-benefit model. For them, since there are no special representation systems for the extraterritorial electorate, campaigns are promoted abroad when the expected flow of votes exceeds the economic costs and logistical difficulties. Although this matter is undoubtedly relevant, political practices (like all activities carried out in spheres of relative autonomy) develop logics of valuation and capitalization that exceed and redefine the instrumental criteria and parameters of universal claim.

Political work—that is, the set of practices that constitute the sphere considered socially as political, and the dynamics of involvement in it—is not only defined by the value assigned to each task (such as gaining electoral support), but part of the meanings that configure it are also associated with the (re)production of spaces of belonging and with the recognition of the diverse subjects occupying it (Gaztañaga, 2013). In this sense, the activities of “Evo cabinet” members were not only a way of seeking support for the Bolivian elections, but also of continuing to be part of the internal life of the MAS-IPSP and, therefore, of its forms of positioning and its disputes. During an October 2020 campaign event in Barrio Futuro, Jonathan stated: “I came to Argentina to continue the struggle” and highlighted the joy of “being able to continue meeting with comrades committed to Evo and the process of change” (Jonathan, personal communication, October 8, 2020).

As such, the organization of the electoral campaign in Argentinian cities, with the presence of numerous leaders and commanded directly by the former president, became a priority for them. The situation analyzed is exceptional, but evidences the need to address the internal reasons of party life and the specific meanings that it acquires.

They distributed the roles of the Political Committee members and of those who joined during the process, in addition to developing negotiations with different Argentinian political spaces. These actors reoriented the decisions and encouraged the incorporation of new militants in leading positions.

The criteria for campaign development—and the resource needs to meet them—established by Jonathan and Orlando as coordinators of the board strongly transformed the positions. Although in the previous electoral processes the MAS-IPSP La Plata had received some contributions, in 2020 an articulation of another magnitude was sought. Evo Morales himself or his closest representatives negotiated different forms of support at the national level with trade union and political organizations in the context of arrival. These agreements then required an instance of local concretion: these negotiations and conversations for operational coordination were carried out by Jonathan and Orlando first, and then by some militants from La Plata. Thus, the Political Committee members received the indication at different times to request different elements from the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (ATE) (State Workers Association), the La Campora organization, and some of the municipalities under control of the Justicialist Party (such as Quilmes, Berisso, and Ensenada), among others.

The articulation with other organizations not only revitalized the arguments of those who insisted on the compatibility between militancy in different spaces, but also opened the possibility for new activists to join the party. Thus, different representatives of Argentinian political organizations were quickly designated as members: Barrios de Pie and other organizations with a presence in the city’s horticultural belt—such as the Asociación de Medieros y Afines (ASOMA) (Association of Mediators and Related Workers), the Frente Rural del Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos (MTE-Rural) (Rural Front of the Excluded Workers Movement), and the Union de Trabajadores de la Tierra (UTT) (Union of Field Workers) —had members appointed.

In addition, the case of a La C mpora leader—daughter of Bolivians—and a leader (arrived as a child in Argentina) with a position in the local Movimiento de Unidad Popular (MUP) (Popular Unity Movement) stands out: they not only joined, but became key in the negotiation process with different political actors and occupied a relevant place in the tasks that Jonathan assigned to them.

Faced with this situation, those who until then were the Committee’s authorities expressed their discontent, and showed decreased enthusiasm in their tasks. However, the relevance of the “Evo cabinet” members, their symbolic capital as MAS-IPSP referents in Bolivia and as protagonists of the policies implemented during their governments, limited the impact of the dissidents and allowed the campaign to develop further, on many occasions, without their intervention. For their part, those who joined quickly took on relevant tasks and, after a time of *fighting the good fight*, felt that they had gained legitimacy through their militant work and the articulations that Evo Morales himself developed with Argentinian politics. This was explained by Zulema, daughter of Bolivians, member of La C mpora, who was interviewed in January 2021:

The space [referring to the La Plata Political Committee] has always been very rooted in the fact that Argentinian organizations do not participate, that discussion is always there. We [Bolivian militants from Argentinian organizations] are fighting this battle with our actions and practices, right? (...) It has not been easy... and today there is no rejection at all, there is an understanding that we are political actors in society, and that we are active in different spaces, that we are active for political construction based on the same projects: because Evo’s project, like Lucho Arce’s project, like Alberto and Cristina’s project, is exactly the same. The score is more than settled. Evo has demonstrated this with his presence in Argentina, so there is no discussion (Zulema, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

The campaign was organized through different forms of territorial and communicational work. Its central command was in charge of distributing different products such as videos and flyers that circulated through WhatsApp and different networks (especially Facebook). Getting messages spread on the community’s radio stations was an important task that the activists at the board took on, not always successfully. They also received digital posters: in these cases, the members of MAS-IPSP La Plata needed contributions to print them, which they obtained mainly from the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA) (Argentine Workers’ Central Union) and ATE. In addition, they put up banners in different neighborhoods, for whose creation and placement they were supported by an organization with a certain influence in the governments of Ensenada and Quilmes, called Quebracho.

On the other hand, three forms of territorial presence were enacted. First, two Campaign Houses were opened: one in the city downtown (on a property belonging to a couple of MAS militants, who ran a greengrocer there) and the other on the western outskirts, in the Futuro neighborhood (in a space lent to the president of the local Committee at that time). These spaces served as meeting places and as a concentration of different resources that were then distributed.

At the same time, a very important task was to visit different neighborhoods. This task required coordination with both organizations and groups of migrants and with Argentinian collectives with

a significant number of Bolivians in. Obviously, the discourse of those recently arrived were relevant in this case, but, in addition, their own presence made it easier for the activists settled in La Plata to strengthen some relationships that they already had. Of the universe of groups and neighborhoods that were incorporated into the campaign, the interviewees especially highlighted the arrival and collaboration of groups of fruit and vegetable producers. These groups allowed them to hold numerous meetings in premises and farms that the organizations own throughout the peri-rural belt of the city.

Finally, coordination with other organizations of both migrants and Argentinians was important so as to enable the dissemination of campaign materials, queries about the electoral roll, and information on how to register to participate in the electoral process, without the need for the daily presence of members of the Political Committee. Thus, especially in some neighborhoods, the militant work was delegated to local representatives (even Argentinian representatives).

A logistics team was formed for election day, whose purpose was to coordinate with various actors the contribution and distribution of different resources necessary to carry out the tasks proposed by the MAS-IPSP: from preparing food and distributing hand sanitizer for delegates and precinct chiefs, to setting up a transportation schedule, necessary due to the expansion of voting locations a few days before the elections.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the link between those who arrived and the party leadership, and the governmental spaces of the community to which they belonged (Yuval-Davis, 2006) gave them an authority and prestige that they put into action to transform the functioning of the political committees and the electoral campaign in Argentina. Clearly, this symbolic capital was not only effective among the MAS militants, but also allowed them to redefine the links with Argentinian political organizations.

#### CONCLUSIONS: CLOSENESS-DISTANCE IN TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL PRACTICES

Studies on transnational political processes have shown that the country of origin and its reference figures occupy a central place in the organization processes of diasporas. For this reason, investigating the relationships that emigrants develop with party authorities is a key element in understanding the way in which political fields that cross national borders are constituted and function, and of the forms of participation that are sustained from abroad.

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<sup>7</sup> Fearing that many people would gather in schools temporarily repurposed as voting centers and that it would be impossible to comply with the health protocols due to COVID-19, the government of the province of Buenos Aires decided to double the number of institutions available, reducing the number of tables in each building by half. To transport voters, the board, with the collaboration of Argentinian militants (especially from La C mpora), arranged for vehicles to be available at the schools that made trips to the other locations that also served as voting centers.

There is no doubt that *the homeland* emerges as a fundamental symbolic point of reference. But although the reference is recurrently made by referring to precise geographic locations, these referrals are often displaced or mediated, producing other articulations between place and identity. In this sense, the question of (how, where, and when it materializes) the community *of origin* is key.

In this article's case study, it can be observed that the arrival of Bolivian leaders and officials to the AMBA implied the reterritorialization of a fundamental prestige for activism. The arrival here relocated the symbolic capital around which they diagram their activities and construct their modalities of political affiliation and national belonging.

In turn, this prestige not only demonstrated its effectiveness at the level of Bolivian activism, but was a condition for the possibility of other kinds of articulations with Argentinian organizations. Other works have pointed out that, progressively, since the mid-2000s, Argentinian social, partisan, and union groups have produced growing relationships with migrant groups, in many cases pursuing electoral ends (Rodrigo, 2023). This acknowledgement of and prior connection with migrant leaders acquired another magnitude with the arrival of Bolivian leaders who received special attention to their requests.

In this way, the arrivals introduced a series of important transformations in the operative ways of the MAS-IPSP, most of which are linked to the change in scale that the campaign acquired. The increase in relations with institutions and groups in the receiving context redefined many of the militant tasks that had been carried out and, mainly, implied a revision of the criteria that governed the life of the Political Committee.

Thus, proximity to party figures arises as the fundamental element in the transformation of MAS activism in the AMBA. The key lies in the involvement of these figures in the daily activities, and in their direct and continuous impact on the web of relationships that such activities imply. Thus, identifying this matter allows to position closeness/distance as a dimension to be taken into account when analyzing transnational political processes.

Obviously, the notions of *near* and *far* do not refer to a certain number of kilometers, but to the intensity of the relationship and the degree (and possibilities) of involvement in the links that extraterritorial activism considers politically significant. Urry (2002) pointed out that part of the arrangements that organize various spaces and networks, both formal and informal, are linked to the modalities of construction and sustenance of ties, and argued that physical co-presence continues to be a relevant element in the construction of social capital. Thus, the production of closeness, by means of creating of institutions, by visiting, and by the arrival of exiles, can be observed in the birth of the MAS-IPSP in the AMBA, and was an unavoidable part of its development.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.



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