

ARTICLE

# Their country's global citizens: Political and economic agency of Senegalese diaspora

Ana Uzelac

Much has been written about migrant flows from Africa to Europe in the past years. The news coverage and policy writing alike have been dominated by the competing narratives of securitisation and victimisation - the former framing migrants as a threat to European political and economic system and the corrosive element in the European societies, the latter depicting them predominantly as victims of poverty, human smugglers or EU migration policies. Both these narratives however fail to do justice to the extent of migrants' agency and, once they have settled in the host countries the degree to which they exert economic and political influence on their countries of origin, to which many remain closely connected. One of the most striking examples of these dynamics is Senegal.<sup>[1]</sup>

The failure to see migrants as agents in their countries' political and economic life – beyond remittances and limited private investments - undermines the effectiveness of EU migration management policies towards African states, often leading to poorly fitting policy responses that fail to deliver to all the parties involved. The five Progress Reports on the EU migration partnership policies published thus far all stress the low rates of return of irregular migrants to West African countries and the insufficient consular support these countries are offering in identifying migrants as citizens and facilitating their (forced) returns. The growing symbolic value of returns for all parties is threatening to stall progress on other fronts – and it fails to address the diaspora's agency and potentially also leverage its influence on domestic policies.

Senegal is West Africa's most stable, if not exactly most prosperous country. The chronic nature of Senegalese economic woes combined with the democratic nature of the Senegalese political system mean that voter dissatisfaction can have real consequences for the political establishment and its individual members. A small but significant part of those voters are Senegalese living abroad - and their often overlooked political agency will be the focus of this article.

## Diaspora as development and social protection actor

Senegal prides itself on its broad international outlook, rooted among others in its long and ambiguous history of migration and participation of its people in world affairs. Centuries ago the world's largest slave trading hub was established just off its shores, putting the place and its people at the epicentre of one of the darkest episodes of modern history. During the French colonial rule, Senegalese nationals, together with other colonised nations, were recruited into the French infantry, participating in French wars and in the process developing a complex sense of belonging to the French political and cultural space, while simultaneously being discriminated against within it.



© Magali Nougier / Flickr

*Dakar, Senegal 2011.*

Following its 1960s independence, Senegal soon emerged as one of West Africa's success stories in terms of the democratic nature of its political system and its stability. Its economy however was highly dependent on export of fossil fuels and minerals, and never managed to recover from the oil prices collapse in the 1980s. The growth Senegal has managed to achieve since is largely cancelled out by high population growth. The country's population quadrupled and the economy was unable to absorb the country's youth, whose official unemployment has been averaging at 13,2% over the past decade<sup>[2]</sup>.

In the course of these economically turbulent decades, Senegal emerged both as a migration hub within Africa, attracting people from other African nations - and as a source of outward migration, first within West Africa and with time, towards Europe and the US. In time, this resulted in a highly active and engaged European diaspora - initially in France and later in Italy and Spain - as well as increasingly high dependency of the state on the diaspora's financial contributions.

**Remittances at a glance**

Remittances represent on average 10 percent of Senegal's GDP since 2006 (12 percent according to the IMF), contributing four times more than FDI flows and around as much as half of exports of goods and services. Senegal is fourth in Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of total remittances (just behind the much more populous Nigeria, Sudan, and Kenya) and fifth in remittances as percentage of GDP (behind the small states of Lesotho, Togo, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau).

The European Union is by far the biggest source of monetary remittances, accounting for 51 percent of transfers in 2007, according to data from the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO). According to the same source, the USA accounts for 7 percent of the total remittances, while West African countries account for 8 percent (down from 12 percent in 2006).

In Senegal, around half of the households have a migrant abroad. Recipient households mainly use remittances for current consumption and rent (around two-thirds of the households), for health and education expenses, and very rarely for real estate or for business investments.

*Source: Tome (2017)*

According to the latest World Bank data, there are 643,640 Senegalese or 4% of the country's population officially registered as living abroad.<sup>[3]</sup> Last year, their contribution in remittances was estimated at USD 2,238 billion<sup>[4]</sup>, or almost 14% of the country's GDP - and equalling the country's revenues from export of goods.<sup>[5]</sup> In comparison, the Overseas Development Assistance to Senegal has been averaging USD 885 million since 2010<sup>[6]</sup> - barely 40% of the total remittances contribution. Arguably, nowadays, "the true driver of Senegal's economy is migrants' income".

Senegalese living abroad have also gone beyond providing direct remittances to their families, and have also been creating fund-pooling mechanisms to implement collective investments in their communities' infrastructure. This engagement is mainly done through some form of hometown associations (HTAs) or "*associations des ressortissants*" that fund collective projects aimed at improving the infrastructure and institutions in the community of origin - building, renovating, or supplying schools or medical centres, funding mosques or even improving basic infrastructure such as water, road, or electricity networks<sup>[7]</sup>.

With such a large economic footprint, the country's diaspora has been increasingly seen as a key development actor in the country, fulfilling at least three important government tasks:

- Providing access to hard currency and stabilizing the exchange rate
- Supporting domestic consumption, and thus economic growth
- Acting as a social safety net, thus reducing pressure on government to provide these services

In view of this, with half of Senegalese families having at least one member abroad, it could be said that the diaspora plays a role of an informal development agency and social security net wrapped in one, to which the state has outsourced a significant part of its responsibilities in terms of social protection.<sup>[8]</sup>

So while from the European point of view the economic development of Senegal is seen as a solution for reducing migration, in particular in its illegal form, Senegal sees migration as an actual tool of development and a much needed social security.

### **A Political Voice**

The remarkable role that Senegalese diaspora plays in the country's economy has in the course of the past decades slowly translated into a stronger political voice - both formal and informal. Many observers of Senegalese affairs, both publicists and academics, seem to believe that diaspora support may have even given the current Senegalese president, Macky Sallé, the crucial edge that enabled him to defeat his opponent, then-incumbent Abdoulaye Wade in the 2012 presidential election runoff. But the diaspora's political influence - regardless of its size - is neither linear nor self-evident. The in-country establishment and its voters abroad have a long history of mutual trade-offs and struggles for influence that testify both to the political robustness of Senegalese global community and the complexity of Senegalese political and societal structures.



© Mariusz Kluzniak / Flickr

*Saint Louise fishing village in Senegal.*

Migration issues have become of interest to the Senegalese state at the turn of the century, when the country's establishment - in an apparent effort to harness the growing financial flows coming from diaspora - adopted the discourse linking migration and development, and started setting up institutions aimed at extracting the financial and human capital from the European and later also US-based Senegalese diaspora. This approach was extractive in its nature and consisted of three key lines of intervention: promoting private economic investments of Senegalese living abroad in Senegal, supporting migrant pooled fund mechanisms abroad and their development projects in home communities, and leveraging the resources and expertise of the highly skilled diaspora for the benefit of Senegal.<sup>[9]</sup>

The key among these institutions today is the Ministry of External Affairs and Senegalese Living Abroad with three Directorates specialising in attracting diaspora investments or protecting their welfare and rights abroad. The Ministry's work is supported by an advisory body— Superior Council of the Senegalese Abroad, with a mandate to represent migrant associations around the world and “manage, protect and foster the Senegalese abroad.” Several other Ministries are also involved with different aspects of migration policies, although the lack of a single state migration policy means their efforts are often uncoordinated. The more important among them are the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Authorities - both working on leveraging diaspora remittances, pooled funds and investments. Another key actor is the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which has been the governmental structure, tasked with signing bilateral migration management agreements with countries such as France or Spain.

## Senegalese diaspora has gradually managed to assert its own channels of political influence on the country's governing structures

But more importantly, with time, Senegalese diaspora has gradually managed to assert its own channels of political influence on the country's governing structures, increasing its agency and translating some of the dispersed economic power it wields through individual migrants' remittances into a formal place at the political decision-making table.

Senegalese citizens living abroad can vote in country's elections, and many observers have argued that they also tend to have an important weight in determining the outcome through their votes as well as through their influence on relatives back home. In fact, since 2000, all the major electoral campaigns were organised not only in Senegal but also in major migrants' countries of settlement, notably the United States and France - with Paris and New York being considered as “the main battlegrounds” for presidential elections. With over 400 voting places opened in countries that count even less than 200 registered residents, Senegal, seems to hold the record for the largest number of diaspora polling stations.

In the already mentioned 2012 presidential elections, the defeated incumbent claimed that he was pushed in the runoff because “the Occident campaigned against him”<sup>[10]</sup> And although the number of electors registered on voting lists abroad is low (about 3.4 % of the total), diaspora's voice is expected to reverberate and impact voters' choices back in Senegal. Diaspora vote is thus expected to have a symbolic value and a multiplier effect beyond its actual weight.



© European Union.

*High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, visiting Senegal in 2016.*

A 2016 study, which included exit poll surveys from 2012 elections and in-depth qualitative analysis of influencing pathways, shows that migrants' economic power increases their voice, and their ability to affect electoral outcomes in their home country. But the evidence doesn't bare out the idea of a linear "vote multiplier" factor, and instead points out at the more complex reasons and pathways in which diaspora influences the election outcome, having to do with the overall perception of migrants as important development and social actors at national and community levels. "Non-migrants might think their personal interest coincides with that of migrants: given Senegal's dependency on the resources of migration, it makes sense for the former to think a government that would protect migrants' interests, or encourage the diaspora to invest in the country, will also (more or less directly) serve their own interest."<sup>[11]</sup>

## the diaspora's influence on Senegalese politics, and especially its migration policies seems set to grow in the coming years

This personal and status-derived influence is compounded by the human and social capital of the diaspora through its individual members who are able to make a difference in the actual campaigns. The diaspora is considered as a pool of skilled individuals from which presidential candidates sometimes drew to form the teams responsible in particular for online and international communication, the drafting of programs, the establishment of networks of international influence and fundraising<sup>[12]</sup>.

If anything, the diaspora's influence on Senegalese politics, and especially its migration policies seems set to grow in the coming years. Under president Macky Sall, diaspora's informal influence has been formalised last year by allocating 15 out of 165 seats in the Senegalese parliament for overseas voters.

## Conclusion

The right to vote and to have parliamentary representatives appears as another irreversible democratic conquest that Senegalese diaspora will not easily give up on. International migration has thus become not only a central feature of Senegalese identity and the standard model of social advancement, but also a tangible element of its daily political life, fully represented in country's discourse and at all levels of policy-making. The same people that some European policy-makers view as law-breakers and a potential economic and societal threat, are viewed by their country of origin as valued citizens, future development agents and voters with formal parliamentary representation.

This makes it harder for Senegalese politicians to agree with and implement policies that would undermine the size, financial reach or political power of its current or future diaspora - and calls on the policy-makers in Europe to tailor their policies in order to do justice to the country's complex political and economic reality. In order for any migration management to be successful, it needs to find a way to reconcile the two different roles that the same people play in these respective societies and offer visible and viable political and economic alternatives to cushion the anticipated loss of income and economic and political pressures that would be the inevitable consequences of any serious curbing of Senegalese migration to Europe.

## Noten

[1] The author would like to thank Jos Meester of Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit for providing valuable comments to this article that have significantly contributed to the quality of analysis

[2] Statista, 'Senegal: Youth unemployment rate from 2007 to 2017 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/812958/youth-unemployment-rate-in-senegal/>)'.

[3] World Bank, 2018, Bilateral Migration Matrix 2018 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>)..

[4] World Bank 2017, Bilateral Remittances Matrix 2017 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>).

[5] Resource Trade.earth, 'Senegal (<https://resourcetrade.earth/data?year=2016&exporter=686&units=value>)'.

[6] OECD, 'DEVELOPMENT AID AT A GLANCE, 'STATISTICS BY REGION 2. AFRICA' (<http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/Africa-Development-Aid-at-a-Glance-2018.pdf>), 2018 edition

[7] For a more detailed description of how these pooled funds work, see: Toma, S (2017) *Engaging with Its Diaspora: The Case of Senegal* in J. Mangala (ed.), *Africa and its Global Diaspora*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

[8] *Ibid.* and interviews with various IGO officials in Europe and Dakar, February-March 2018

[9] Toma, S., 2017. *Engaging with Its Diaspora: The Case of Senegal* in J. Mangala (ed.), *Africa and its Global Diaspora*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

[10] Official election results seem to support his thesis: in the first round, incumbent Abdoulaye Wade was in the lead in Senegal but came second in France and third in the United States. In the second round, he lost by an even greater margin abroad. Macky Sall won with 84 % of the votes in France and 82,5% in the U.S., compared to 65.8 % in Senegal

[11] Vari-Lavoisier, I 2016. *The economic side of social remittances: how money and ideas circulate between Paris, Dakar, and New York* (<https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-016-0039-6>) *Comparative Migration Studies* 4:20 Page 25 – 34.

[12] Smith, É. 2015. *Sénégal, la diaspora fait-elle l'élection : Le vote à distance de 1992 à 2012. Afrique contemporaine*, 256,(4), 51-72. doi:10.3917/afco.256.0051.

---

## Author



**Ana Uzelac**

Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit ▶

(<https://www.clingendael.org/person/ana-uzelac>)