

WALL IN THE HEART OF THE CITY: THE IMPACT OF THE DONALD TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS' MIGRATION POLICY ON THE COMMUNITY OF NOGALES

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Abstract

This study focuses on the observation and interpretation of the Trump administrations' migration policies and their economic and social implications from the perspective of the twin cities of Nogales. The history of migration between the United States of America and Latin-America is deeply rooted and can be traced back for centuries. The information derived from this could provide a comprehensive picture of the practical functioning and everyday life of the migration's focal points, as well as the relocation of the migration centres. Furthermore, it also points out the important economic interlinkages and the significant consequences that political/geopolitical regulations have for the region. Understanding the twin cities of Nogales' situation could be a great guidance to shed the light on reality and to comprehend Donald Trump's migration policy more thoroughly.

Keywords: Mexico, United States of America, Donald Trump, migration, migration policy, Ambos Nogales, Sonora, Arizona

1. Introduction

„The term immigration policy encompasses all those measures by which a state regulates the influx of persons, in particular those who want to establish residence in their territory either temporarily or permanently” (Perez, 2015). Migration ties between the United States of America (hereinafter: United States) and Mexico have existed for centuries now, although it is one of the most crucial and controversial issues in the Western political discourse. The official length of the American and Mexican border is 3155 kilometres, of which 1023 kilometres are secured by fences (CIA,2025). This makes it one of the longest and most complex international borders in the world, resulting in vital migration route for those who cross borders.

1.1. *The Trump Administration's migration policy*

The primary aim of the current president, Donald John Trump's (hereinafter: Trump) migration policy is to reduce the number of undocumented people within the borders of the United States. Trump has gained a large amount of voters due to his campaign promises regarding immigration. These declarations have been implemented through executive orders, regulatory revisions and general restrictions under the first (2017-2021) and second (2025-presumably 2029) Trump Administrations. The president's program items may have changed or evolved during the past couple of

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years but the four main factors are still the pillars of the migration policy: the economy, politics, security and humanitarian conditions (Diaz, 2024).

Only a few days after his second inauguration Trump shut down humanitarian parole programs, which entitled immigrants to reside legally in the United States without a visa. Furthermore, he dramatically broadened interior immigration enforcement and the administration also announced the suspension of refugee resettlements. Perhaps the most severe and controversial issue was the potential elimination of birthright citizenship for infants born in the United States but do not have at least one parent who is an authorized perpetual resident (Muzaffar-Bush, 2025).

Another fundamental measure is the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), perhaps better known as the „Remain in Mexico” policy, which decrees that asylum seekers must stay in Mexico until the official date of their immigration court hearings, often forcing them to endure inhuman conditions alongside thousands of other people who are in the same situation (Bush-Joseph, 2025). According to the Migration Policy Institute (Bush-Joseph, 2025) nearly 81 000 refugees were included in the program during the 2019-2022 time period.

It is also essential to mention the “zero-tolerance” Immigration Enforcement Policy, which was established by the Department of Justice (DOJ) on May 7, 2018 (Congressional Research Service, 2019). In accordance with this, every foreign individuals – even those who have arrived with children – who crosses the border illegally, is subject to criminal prosecution. As a result, they have been sent to federal prisons, where children are not allowed to stay and this has led to the separation of a large number of families (McBride et al., 2023).

The pandemic has played a major role in migration discourse as well because the administration could easily justify the expulsion of asylum seekers by citing Title 42 and referring to the public health situation at the time. Under this legal provision the government was able to deport immigrants on the grounds that they posed a serious threat to the country and its citizens as they could spread the virus (Ayres-Doyle, 2023). However, the Trump Administration has continued to apply Title 42 for a long time after the critical crisis, raising questions in the people about the proper and ethical use of the provision (Diaz, 2024).

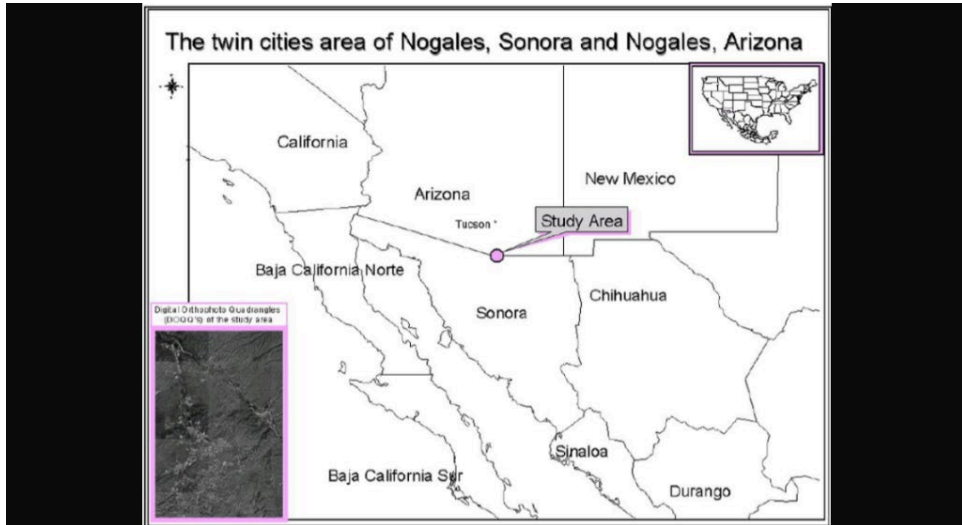
Apart from that, another major practical measure emerged in the form of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The number of Latino arrests has doubled during the second Trump Administration and has triggered severe sense of fear and vulnerability among people not only in the border regions but throughout the whole country. The ICE has been acting in a raid-style manner, which intensifies the social discontent (Ong et al., 2025). Last but not least the Republican government reinforced fenced borders with razor wire, which also signals a shift in both the border infrastructure and rhetoric. This is significant not only in terms of foreign relations but as an important symbol for the society as well. (Kummeneje, 2026).

1.2. Ambos Nogales

The Trump administrations’ strict measures, expanded enforcement and everyday surveillance have caused serious economic and social tensions among the border-region communities, including Ambos Nogales, which is unique in that it is geographically situated along the U.S. and Mexican border. One part belongs to the United States, more precisely to the State of Arizona while the other is officially a northwestern, Mexican territory (State of Sonora) (*Figure 1*). The latter, also called

Heroica Nogales, was established 9 years earlier (founded in 1884) and currently has 264 782 inhabitants, while Nogales, Arizona (founded in 1893) has a population of 19 753. (Data USA, 2022), (Secretaría de Economía, 2020)

Figure 1. Displaying the examined area on a map



Source: Brady et al. (2002, p. 6).

Historically, the existence of the two separate cities dates back to 1854, when under the Gadsden Purchase agreement the United States bought 76,840 square kilometers of territory from Mexico for 10 million dollars. The city initially functioned as part of a migration and trade route – later called El Camino Real (The King’s Highway) – which also emphasizes its vital role in our modern, fast-paced world. The name Nogales, comes from a Spanish word, which means „walnut”. This refers to the fact, that this area was very rich in walnut trees, which provided an opportunity to use them as trade goods (City of Nogales, n.d., 2016). The physical separation of the twin cities, collectively known as Ambos Nogales,² (hereinafter: Nogales) began in 1918, when American and Mexican soldiers became involved in a firefight – the so-called „Battle of Ambos Nogales” – which was most likely triggered or fueled by racial discrimination among the peoples. This resulted in constant shootings along the borders and gave the idea as well as the determination to build the first permanent fences (Parra, 2020).

2. Multidimensional Impacts of Migration and Border Policies

The reasons behind the migration processes have been dominantly and not surprisingly the economic opportunities and the higher salaries, offered by the United States (Kummeneje, 2019). Six key push-factors can be identified as primary drivers of the migration crisis: population growth, poverty, climate change, global coffee prices, corruption and lack of public security (Veres, 2021).

² In English Ambos means „both” so for the sake of simplicity I am going to refer to the city as „Nogales” if the given context includes it as a whole.

The North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)³ was a crucial component of Mexico's economy, that made the economic upturn possible in Central America. Under the agreement, tariffs for the majority of the products, traded among the three participating countries were abolished, with a primary focus on automobile manufacturing, agriculture and textile industry (Chatzky et al., 2008). NAFTA had its short-lived beneficial impacts on Mexico's economy by modernizing economy itself, creating numerous workplaces and making Mexico more attractive to foreign investors. However, Trump's campaign agenda („America First“) had different messages from the original agreement. The Trump Administration's opinion was that NAFTA provided too much space for foreign investment in Mexico and as a consequence it led to job losses in the United States. That is the reason why the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA),⁴ which serves as a revised version of NAFTA, came into effect on July 1, 2020, (Meylor-Kulkarni, 2022). Nogales' economy is in fact based on cross-border trade and migration, which is also proved by the so called Maquiladora systems.

„A maquiladora is a manufacturing plant that imports and assembles duty-free components for export“ (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). These systems played a major and very significant role, which directly led to the economic expansion of Nogales in the mid-1960's. In order to alleviate the labor shortage in the Mexican northern border region, the Border Industrialization Program was implemented. Its most fundamental purpose was to encourage foreign companies to assemble products for export in northern Mexico. This meant that these corporations had the right to establish production facilities – without the obligation to involve Mexican partners in the businesses – and to take advantage of low-cost Mexican workforce. By the year 2000, Nogales had the most comprehensive and complex Maquiladora-system having approximately 1.3 million employees (Nogales, 2025).

It goes without saying, that the economic and migration ties between the United States and Mexico that can be traced back to centuries have provided an excellent foundation, which resulted in the prominent role of Nogales. However, this bilateral relationship does not mean that the intensity of the development is equal between the twin cities. On the U.S. side the town is not among the most developed areas of the country, in contrast to Nogales, Sonora, which has great growth rates among the border areas. Without a doubt these continue to form the bases of the region's economy to this very day and there are about 110 Maquiladoras operating in Nogales, Sonora (Nogales, 2025). The close cooperation between the twin cities is reflected in the numerous American factories located in Sonora, which employ cheap Mexican workforce, hence they ensure job opportunities as well. These factories generally focus on electronics and automotive sectors. However, Trump's migration rhetoric has reduced the productivity and efficiency of the Maquiladoras as well, as the mass deportations and strict regulations have deterred the workers from the employment near the border area. This has led to a decline in manufacturing output due to labor shortages.

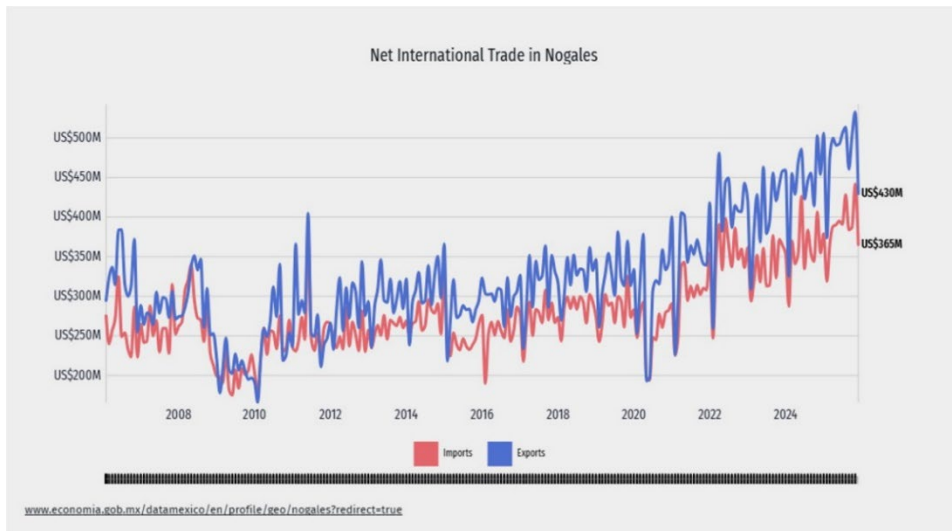
³ Implemented in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established a comprehensive framework for trade among Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

⁴ The Spanish acronym is T-MEC.

2.1. Economic impacts

In addition, Nogales, Sonora is one of the most significant agricultural hubs, as the Nogales-Mariposa border crossing⁵ serves as the point of entry for the fruits and vegetables to the United States. It makes the Mariposa Land Port of Entry (The Mariposa POE) Arizona's largest international commercial gateway with more than 10 billion dollars of import and export per year (Leslie & Leslie, 2025). The predecessor of this industry was initiated in 1944 under the name „West Mexico Vegetable Distributors Association”, although after the accession of the NAFTA-agreement, it changed its name to Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (Leslie & Leslie, 2025). Long before that, in 1882 the Sonora Railway connected with the Arizona and New Mexico Railroad in Nogales, creating the first rail connection to span the U.S.–Mexico border (*History | Nogales, AZ*, 2016). Unfortunately, the threats of tariff increases by the Trump Administration have undermined the confidence of the majority of traders and due to slower customs controls and limitations, shipments became more time-consuming and costly (Leslie & Leslie, 2025).

Figure 2. Exports and imports in Nogales between 2007 and 2025



Source: Data México (2024).

It is self-evident that the most influential factor in the economies of twin cities is tourist traffic, that is, tourism itself. It is very common for Latin-American people to go either shopping or just sightseeing to Nogales, Arizona, which generates enormous profits. On the other hand, the U.S. city is not the only one that makes use of the beneficial and profitable cross-border services such as the emergence of the so-called medical tourism, which is an American invention. The reason for this is that the medical care – for instance dental care – is way cheaper on the Sonora side, therefore it normally means a stable number of tourists and international visitors. The security measures and border crossing restrictions have their consequences in these areas as

⁵ All commercial traffic entering the United States via Nogales passed through the Mariposa Port of Entry.

well as numerous restaurants and smaller shops have been forced to close (Maxwell, 2025).

Figure 2 provides an excellent basis for the comparison between administrations throughout the years. It presents detailed data on the Net International Trade in Nogales (Sonora) (*Figure 2*), as well as the amount of exports and imports. There is no doubt that the Mexican economy – in this specific case, the economy of Nogales, Sonora – is severely dependant on the United States, because it is its most fundamental trade origin and trade destination. During the first Trump Administration (2016-2020) the exports and imports increased slightly and showed an upward trend, although numerous fluctuations were observed in 2018-2019. In those periods Trump implemented several new measures to restrict immigration, such as stricter custom tariffs, surveillances and policies like the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or the strengthening and funding of the border wall. This resulted in increasing volatility and recurring declines on the graph. The same pattern is demonstrated at the end of the chart, the second Trump Administration continued these policies, which resulted in very similar border regulations and economic challenges, concerning Nogales.

As the author of the resesarch has already mentioned, local workers have to face job insecurity and have to adapt to stricter federal enforcement. However, in addition to the negative effects, the benefits of these changes must also be highlighted in order to comprehend the current economic condition and operation. On the long run, the local industries were able to become more resilient and gained a stronger capacity/capability (McBride et al., 2023).

2.2. Environmental problems

The problems of Mexican infrastructure are highlighted by the environmental pollutions of the region as well. The industrial and population growth put a great pressure on the cities, especially on the sewage system and water supply (Sanchez, 1995). Maquiladora factories emit pollutants that harm the air, soil and the waters. However, the migration crisis completely draws the attention away of these issues causing the city to become overburdened.

Alongside with the severe environmental impacts, these problems act as geopolitical evidence, as they physically symbolize the legal gap in Trump's isolationist rhetoric (Brady et al., 2002). This is because industrial waste and wastewaters are flowing in the direction⁶ of the United States creating a paradox between the U.S. ideology⁷ and the border wall (Sanchez,1995). After the NAFTA agreement the North American Development Bank has been established to improve the infrastructures along the borders (Sanchez, 1995). These initiatives have faced significant barriers because of the priority shifts of the Sonora side. Although the environmental problems do not seem to be such an urgent issue, they are one of the most significant reasons, why residents are leaving the city and trying to settle in neighboring countries, in this specific case, in the United States.

In conclusion, the environmental and migration crises are deeply intertwined, reflecting a complex relationship between ecological degradation and human mobility and Nogales does not – and cannot – receive enough attention from

⁶ Nogales, Sonora is located at a higher elevation, so the gravitation works its way through.

⁷ The essence of the ideology is that the United States tries to seal itself hermetically from the „Mexican problems“

the city administration. Moreover, recent immigration measures introduced under the Trump Administration have contributed to a growing migrant population in Nogales, Sonora, further intensifying the city’s pre-existing social and environmental vulnerabilities.

2.3. Humanitarian sector

At present, the humanitarian and civil sectors are the cornerstone of Nogales’s economy, with a focus on the existing crisis. Nogales, Sonora is one of the most prominent core areas, playing a key role in providing assistance and care to asylum seekers. These sectors are commonly funded by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) or local non-profit organizations.

The Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a binational, Catholic-based humanitarian organization that operates on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border, specifically in Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. This organization focuses on five core areas, through which it seeks to provide assistance for the people in need. These five areas are humanitarian aid and holistic accompaniment, education, advocacy, border action team and abuse documentation (*Figure 3*), (Kino Border Initiative, 2023). According to data from the Kino Border Initiative, in 2023 more than 9,429 individuals identified as “people on the move” who accessed services at the organization’s Migrant Outreach Center on the Sonora side (Kino Border Initiative, 2024). Notably, over 36 percent of these individuals were minors under the age of 18, underscoring the significant presence of children among displaced populations along the U.S.–Mexico border (*Kino Border Initiative - Iniciativa Kino Para La Frontera*, n.d.). Another important organization, called the Border Community Alliance is located in Tubac, Arizona but plays a very significant role in Nogales, Sonora as well. The organization’s primary goal is to promote binational relationships and to ensure that learning opportunities are a top priority for residents and visitors of Southern Arizona (Border Community Alliance, 2025).

Figure 3. Main strategic priorities for 2022–2026 of Kino Border Initiative



Source: Kino Border Initiative (2022).

The overcrowded refugee centers place enormous social burden on Nogales and its residents. Hundreds of asylum seekers are trapped on the Sonora side of the city unable to avoid exposure to crimes such as kidnapping, rape, robbery or even drug trafficking. The migrants camps are crowded, in addition, the water, food and medical

supplies are limited. Not only the migrants are anxious but locals are more and more insecure as well, they give account of constant fear and inadequate, ineffective public safety. It is not only crime that threatens the life of the immigrants but also the lack of medical support especially during the Pandemic.

There is a so called „CBP One” application, which is designed to help the asylum seeking registrations and make the process faster and more efficient, however according to the users it almost works like a „lottery”, since plethora of people are stuck in the waiting lines for uncertain period of times (*A Line That Barely Budges - Human Rights First*, 2023). The Nogales DeConcini Port of Entry serves as the sole location along the Arizona–Sonora border authorized to process CBP One appointments for asylum seekers (Leslie–Leslie, 2025). As a result, individuals seeking protection across a vast stretch of the border, must travel to Nogales, Mexico, provided they are able to obtain an appointment through the CBP One mobile application (under current protocols). Other ports of entries are not as efficient, which is why this main crossing point is the busiest and the most overburdened. This clearly illustrates how reliance on a single functioning port of entry creates a chokepoint for humanitarian access throughout the border region. Asylum seekers must travel long distances through cartel-controlled territories to reach Nogales. This directly shows the indispensable role the NGO’s play. One of their most critical contributions is documentation, as in lots of cases the U.S. asylum system fails to protect or to give the proper and lawful process to immigrants.

2.4. Media rhetoric

Media has a vital role in every aspects of life particularly in politics. Today we have access to 24/7 coverage, live streams and all the information relevant to any given situation, so the world simply cannot exist without it anymore. The narrative in connection with the immigration relations between the United States and Mexico is often referenced as „border war”, „invasion” or even „battlefront” (Kil, 2019). This justifies strict restrictive measures and normalizes militarization (Ayres-Doyle, 2023). This means that the media often describes the region as a battlefield, emphasizing the fences, armed patrols, crowd, shelters and even thermal cameras.

Figure 4. Symbolizing migration danger near the U.S.–Mexico border



Source: Singleton (2024).

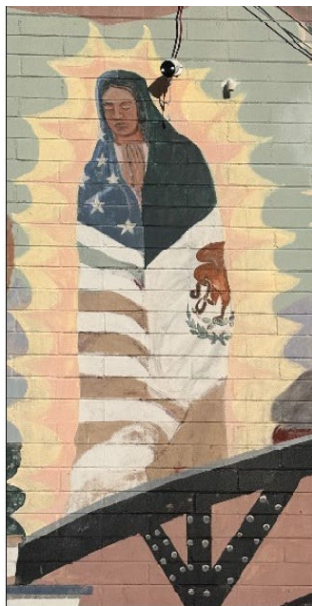
Furthermore, it paints a false picture of the immigrants, they are labeled „criminals“, „animals“ or „intruders“ (Figure 4) and these metaphors have appeared with increasing frequency since the beginning of the first Trump Administration. Also the rhetoric surrounding wall symbolizes not only the physical and economic barrier but also the racial and moral division. It is interesting and highly significant that even though the twin cities almost function like an inseparable organism, the media cites Nogales as the „American civilization“ and the other city as a symbol of „Mexican chaos“ (Kil, 2019).

Nogales plays a fundamental role in the media and serves as an excellent tool to show the people that the border is under a „constant attack“ because the media captures the „flood“ of people and this creates the sense of the dehumanization of the immigrants. What is more, the media tends to overlook the tragedies, which are happening to immigrants, for instance there are hundreds of people yearly, who die in the Sonora-desert during the difficult journey in the hope of a better life, yet news programs never or just rarely mentions them, as they prefer to focus on biased reporting (Kil, 2019).

2.5.Social effects

Besides the economic and humanitarian factors the local political effects have deep impacts on the community as well. Due the „zero-tolerance“ policy the bicultural city has become more politically divided, which has led to social frustration. There are people, whose priority are the security of the border and the restraining of illegal arrivers. In contrast, for others, upholding humanitarian principles is far more important.

Figure 5. Symbolic fusion of Mexican and U.S. identities



Source: Illescas Ph.D. (2024).

The border wall's reconstruction has provided numerous reasons for residents and also artists to organize protests and create monuments. It is not only a physical barrier but also a metaphor that represents cultural, linguistic and economic divisions. This also explains the title of this study, „wall in the heart of the city“. As the author of this study has already mentioned, the artists of the cities express their opinions and feelings against the policies and acknowledge the cultural heritage and long-standing history of Nogales. The painting featured in the study is located in Nogales, Arizona, it represents Virgen de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) with the American and Mexican national flags, wearing them as a coat (*Figure 5*) (Beyond Fronteras, 2024).

3. Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to show how the Trump Administration's migration policy has shaped the economic, humanitarian, cultural and social factors in the twin cities of Nogales. This may contribute to a broader conception and understanding of the topic and draw attention to the significance of border issues due to the long, complex and meaningful relationship between the United States and Mexico. The main focus is on the border regions of the Central American country, that are facing severe pressure day by day. The research reveals that the Trump Administration tends to use executive orders as a convenient tool to regulate the migration situation, especially towards Mexico. However, the executive orders were not sufficient to prevent the chaos, in fact, they have worsened the situation by causing greater polarization within society and communities. The policies, especially the Migration Protection Protocols have turned the region into a sort of waiting room, where thousands of people hope to find better opportunities in life on the other side of the border.

The study provided evidence that due to the restrictions not only did production at Maquiladora factories decline, but local shops and services were also forced to close, as the rate of tourism reduced as well. Foreign investments are also discouraged by Trump's „America First“ policy, to be more specific the threat of tariffs and the visa policies. Nogales' economy is severely dependent on cross-border activities and logistics. As a result, Nogales has to deal with economic challenges, considering that the central pillars of its economy are the Maquiladora-systems, which have fundamental ties to the United States. Many people's jobs require them to commute every day between the cities, but the chaotic border conditions make it extremely difficult or even impossible.

As for the humanitarian sector, Nogales would not be able to survive or revive without the help of the non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations or the various charities. Today, it is precisely these organizations that are playing an active role in addressing the long-standing migration crisis. These humanitarian actors provide legal counselling, basic human needs, offer temporary shelter for asylum seekers and even medical care. To conclude, they carry out tasks that generally fall under the responsibility of state or at least the municipal administration.

The number of illegal/undocumented immigrants may have decreased thanks to the restrictions and new measures in the past year within the border of the United State but it does not mean, that the problem itself is solved. The migration hubs are only relocated, predominantly near the U.S.-Mexican borders, creating a significant economic, physical and social burden on the affected areas.

In contemporary times, migration policy has evolved into identity politics, which is why it receives so much attention in the public media. It is important to emphasize that the region's identity is closely intertwined with its border-related functions. Whereas the twin cities have their own distinct characteristics, it is almost impossible to separate them from the ingrained cultural, social and historical background. This creates a significant tension between the cities and its consequences are clearly visible. In spite of the numerous things in common, political opinion seems to overcome unity and solidarity. Media is largely responsible for that, as it portrays the immigrants as intruders, thereby creating a massive divide between nations and peoples. The microenvironment of the residents is also changing, families are split between the two sides, as maintaining regular contact becomes increasingly difficult and fraught with challenges. Therefore, it is not surprising that the locals convey their opinions and emotions through activism or using art (paintings on the walls, flags). The wall itself represents both the division and mistrust but also the deeply rooted connection and shared destinies (Neuendorf, 2015).

Last but not least, the environmental issues, which are major risk factors and direct incentives for migration are not sufficiently addressed in the public media. Furthermore, this is not only of geographical significance in terms of international relations between the two countries but also a refutation of the American isolationist policy. The COVID-19 and the resulting pandemic are not the most significant factors in this research but they need to be highlighted, as they were major causes and contributed to the resulting migration⁸, and, consequently, to the economic crisis.

Although this study focuses on Nogales, it is advisable to observe other areas along the border or to monitor the migration policies of other administrations – because now it is obvious, that Donald Trump will not be filling his position as a president after this period in office – and their effects on Nogales. Apart from this, the analysis of the resultant community resistance could also raise intriguing questions – even about the region's voter behaviour - since it contributes to deepening the social divisions.

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FAL A VÁROS SZÍVÉBEN: A DONALD TRUMP-KORMÁNYOK MIGRÁCIÓS POLITIKÁJÁNAK HATÁSAI NOGALES KÖZÖSSÉGÉRE

TORMA REGINA

A tanulmány a Trump-kormányok migrációs politikájának megfigyelését és értelmezését, illetve annak gazdasági és társadalmi következményeit mutatja be Nogales ikervárosainak példáján keresztül. Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok és Latin-Amerika migrációs kapcsolatának története rendkívül mélyen gyökerezik, és évszázadokra visszavezethető. Az ebből nyert információk átfogó képet adhatnak a határmenti, migrációs csomópontok gyakorlati működéséről, mindennapjairól, valamint a bevándorlási gócpontok áthelyeződéséről. Mindemellet rámutatnak a fontos gazdasági összefüggésekre, valamint arra is, hogy a politikai/geopolitikai rendelkezések milyen erőteljes hatással vannak a régióra. Nogales ikervárosainak megértése hozzásegíthet a valóság megismeréséhez és Donald Trump migrációs politikájának alaposabb megértéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: Mexikó, Egyesült Államok, Donald Trump, bevándorlás, bevándorláspolitiká, migráció, Ambos Nogales, Sonora, Arizona