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Transit migration entrepreneurship: Explaining Nicaragua's state-controlled, profit-seeking transit migration industry

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Abstract

How and why do governments develop profit-seeking migration industries around transit migration? Restrictive international migration policies, such as border externalization and migrant rentierism, compel migrants to transit through multiple countries to reach their final destinations, creating new dilemmas and opportunities for transit country governments. Between 2021 and 2025, thousands of migrants from across the globe arrived in Nicaragua via charter and commercial flights, aiming to then reach the United States. Nicaragua's authoritarian Ortega-Murillo regime actively facilitated and profited from this influx by eliminating visa requirements and partnering with foreign brokers to coordinate flights, generating revenue amid economic instability and patronage needs. Using Nicaragua as a case study, we introduce the concept of *transit migration entrepreneurship* (TME), a phenomenon in which governments capitalize on migrants' desires to reach nearby countries by proactively developing a profit-seeking transit migration industry. Engaging with research on weaponized migration, migrant and refugee instrumentalization, and the broader migration industry, we argue that TME is most likely to emerge in authoritarian or other illiberal contexts characterized by economic incentives for new revenue, indifference to international pressure, and a political will to exploit transit migration for economic gain. In an era of global migration, other countries may follow Nicaragua's example.

Keywords transit migration; sovereignty; political economy; Latin America; political science; international relations.

Transit migration, or temporary movement into one country with the intention of moving into a different, final destination country, has been a rising global phenomenon. Because of restrictive border policies and externalization efforts, transit migration flows have increased

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as migrants search for new, innovative ways to reach their intended destinations. To influence these migration flows, transit states undertake different strategies including: restricting migrants' entry via quotas and border militarization; weaponizing migration by facilitating migrants' movements into rival countries; instrumentalization tactics where states seek resources from international actors to manage migrants and their needs; and border externalization efforts that create bilateral and multilateral agreements between states to control migration flows.

Although these policies explain various migration management and governance tools, we focus on the state as a central actor in capitalizing on transit migration by creating a revenue generating migration industry. How and why do some governments develop profit-seeking migration industries around transit migration? We explore this question through the case of Nicaragua, where from 2021 to 2025, the authoritarian Ortega-Murillo regime created a booming transit migration industry by dropping visa requirements and coordinating with brokers abroad to attract migrants seeking passage to the United States. The Nicaragua case adds an important extension to literature on the migration industry (e.g., Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013), which often focuses on private actors and institutions, by showing a state acting as the primary agent organizing transit migration for economic motives. We term this *transit migration entrepreneurship* (TME), a phenomenon in which governments capitalize on migrants' desire to reach nearby countries by actively developing a profit-seeking transit migration industry.

Global South countries are central to many contemporary transit routes. For example, the Darién Gap—a dangerous 60-mile corridor connecting South and Central America—became a key waypoint for migrants heading north. In 2020, 8,954 migrants crossed the Darién; by 2023, that number peaked at 520,085 (OHCHR 2025). While wealthier countries seek to harden and externalize their borders, transit migration is increasingly shaped by the policy decisions of Global South states and countries on Europe's periphery (Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019). Recent work emphasizes transit migration's political dimensions, particularly in relation to diplomacy and governance (e.g., Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). As the Nicaraguan case shows, while transit migration often intersects with foreign policy and may be a diplomatic tool, some states may engage with it primarily for economic reasons.

The Ortega-Murillo regime previously limited migration through Nicaragua, while also increasingly restricting its own citizens' mobilities. Witnessing heightened global movement through Central America, however, Nicaragua's government saw an opportunity to raise revenue. Starting in 2021, the regime welcomed migration through Nicaragua to generate fees from migrants, transportation companies, and brokers. By dropping entry visa requirements for various countries, Nicaragua leveraged its sovereignty and geographic location to offer migrants a way to bypass the Darién's dangers and tightening migration restrictions in Panama and South America.[1] Amid broader macroeconomic uncertainty, Nicaragua's government generated millions of US dollars in new revenues through transit migration. Unlike other states, however, Nicaragua did not achieve this by extracting rents from other governments in return for preventing migrants' movements, nor using migrants as a source of precarious labor (see, e.g., Norman 2020; Landherr 2024).

We argue that the Nicaraguan state's behavior diverges from existing concepts and frameworks in the migration literature, namely weaponized migration and migrant/refugee instrumentalization, and requires an extension of understandings of the migration industry. In turn, we develop the concept of TME to describe state development and orchestration of a profit-seeking industry commodifying transit migrants' movements.

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Contextualizing transit migration governance

In recent decades, global migration governance has transformed due to increasingly restrictive policies in destination countries that redefined migration as a threat to national security and stability and closed off regular migration pathways (e.g., Hollifield 1992; Huysmans 1992; Weiner 1985; Zolberg 1978). Restrictive policies force migrants to take indirect and often more dangerous routes, transiting through multiple countries to reach their intended destinations (Papadopoulou 2005; Düvell 2012), thereby introducing new migration governance issues for transit states.

Rising transit migration has traditionally been seen as generating two key responses: border externalization policies and smuggling. Border externalization involves destination states extending border enforcement beyond their territories through bilateral or multilateral agreements, often pursued by Global North states in partnership with Global South countries (Menjívar 2014; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015; Landherr 2024). These policies increase irregular migrant flows and are justified through security logics such as protecting sovereignty and controlling entry, as well as humanitarian logics of "protecting" migrants from dangerous journeys or smugglers (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017). Externalization promotes new forms of "migration management" in transit countries (e.g., Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019) as governments cooperate to prevent migrants from reaching the Global North, often forcing migrants to remain in transit countries or take more complex routes, creating new waypoints like Nicaragua while also fueling smuggling. Smuggling, traditionally framed as informal and largely hidden from state involvement (North 1990; Ostrom 2005), is now understood as more intertwined with state actors and policies (Gallien 2020; Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022). Despite officials and researchers portraying it as criminal activity to be eradicated (e.g., Naím 2006), many view smuggling as a more complex, even humanitarian phenomenon (Achilli 2018; Gallien 2020; van Liempt 2021; Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022).

Nicaragua shows another form of migration governance. In response to shifting global migration policies and increasing transit migration through Central America, Nicaragua's government did not cooperate with border externalization efforts by the United States (the primary regional destination country), nor did it leave migration management to smuggling networks. Beginning in late 2021, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Vice President-turned-Co-President Rosario Murillo welcomed charter flights carrying hundreds of thousands of migrants to Nicaragua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport in Managua. Between May 2023 and May 2024 alone, the Inter-American Dialogue's Manuel Orozco tracked over 1,000 charter flights carrying migrants landing in Nicaragua, effectively allowing them to use the country as a "springboard" to the United States (Miranda Aburto 2024). While migrants initially came from within Latin America and the Caribbean, more people began coming from African and Asian countries including Angola, Libya, India, Iran, and Uzbekistan (AFP 2023), as shown in Fig. 1.

To demonstrate how TME represents a new form of migration management by states, we first situate it in relation to the literatures on weaponized migration, migrant and refugee instrumentalization, and the migration industry. We then empirically demonstrate how TME functions by analyzing the Nicaraguan case, detailing how Nicaragua's authoritarian regime cultivated transit migration to generate new revenue streams for state actors and associates. Next, we assess how this case aligns with or diverges from the existing literatures, arguing that Nicaragua is a "deviant case" (Gerring 2007; Seawright and Gerring 2008) that exemplifies transit migration entrepreneurship rather than other characterizations. We conclude by discussing hypothesized conditions under which states may engage in TME and implications for future scholarship and for policy.

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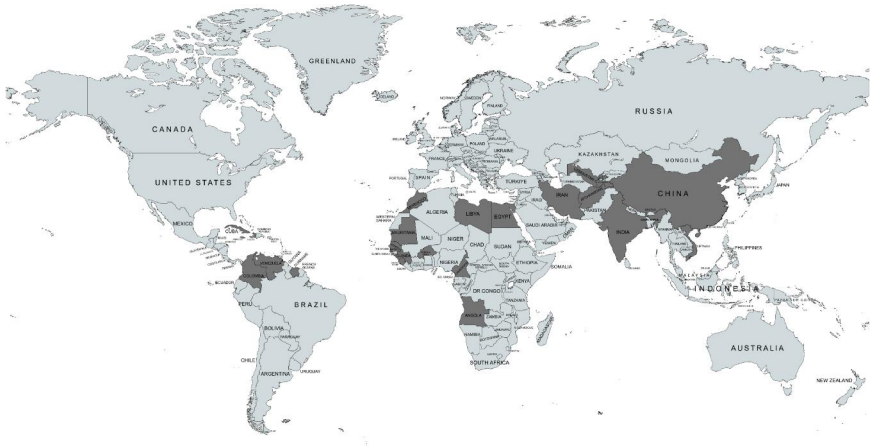


Figure 1. Reported Origin Countries of Transit Migrants Documented Traveling to Nicaragua (Shaded).

Transit migration as a tool

As transit migration increases, governments and other actors in countries along migration routes may decide it offers a useful tool for pursuing their political or economic aims. Three existing research agendas present frameworks for understanding how transit migration is leveraged: weaponized migration, migrant and refugee instrumentalization, and the migration industry.

Weaponized migration

Kelly Greenhill (2010) argues that states may manipulate migration processes to weaponize migrants against rivals. Greenhill (2010: 13) identifies three types of coercive engineered migrations (CEM) or "cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states." Dispossessive engineered migrations target land appropriation and/or the elimination of another group as a threat. Militarized engineered migrations are used to gain military advantage over a target to control territory or resources (usually during armed conflict). Exportive engineered migrations aim to either expel domestic opponents or use migration flows to destabilize foreign governments. Exportive engineered migrations apply most directly to transit migration states, which could channel migrant flows to coerce destination states.

Greenhill views countries carrying out CEM as three types of "challengers" to the global order: generators, agents provocateurs, and opportunists. Generators and agents provocateurs, often characterized as "weak," "illegitimate," and "disenfranchised" states, actively create migration movements whereas opportunists manipulate and exploit preexisting crises (Greenhill 2010: 3, 23). Greenhill argues that CEM's strategic value of lies especially in weaker states' ability to target democracies, undermining their legitimacy by exploiting "hypocrisy costs," or the tension between democracies' professed commitments to liberal human rights norms and restrictive migration policies implemented in practice.[2]

Migrant and refugee instrumentalization

States need not weaponize migrants to view them instrumentally. Migrant and refugee instrumentalization research covers a range of behaviors using migrants or refugees to

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secure economic, geopolitical, and/or symbolic gains. We focus on three key sub-literatures: migrant and refugee rentierism, commodification, and symbolic gains from migration.

First, states often engage in transactional deal-making to either accept forcibly displaced people or prevent migration (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Adamson and Greenhill 2023). Global South countries increasingly leverage their geopolitical positions to obtain rents from other states or international actors who want to limit immigration, in exchange for rentier states keeping refugees within their borders (e.g., Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Lynch and Tsourapas 2024; Micinski and Norman 2024). Second, the related refugee commodification literature emphasizes leveraging migrants for predominantly economic gain, alongside geopolitical benefits (e.g., Arar 2017; Irgil and Norman 2024), transforming displaced persons into "commodities subject to negotiation and trade in the marketplace" (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021: 2748). Third, host states may also gain soft power and reputational benefits internationally or domestically for accepting migrants within their borders (Seeberg and Völkel 2022; Irgil and Tolay 2025). Symbolic gains are often considered spill-over benefits to higher priority direct material gains, though some states may place higher importance on "status, recognition, moral standing, and reputation" (Tolay 2022: 367–368). One country's symbolic gains may come at another's expense, as Greenhill (2010) also describes how weaponized migration's efficacies can sometimes be attributed to symbolic costs inflicted upon the target country.

Migration industry

Early research by Salt and Stein (1997) developed an agenda on a "global migration business" among the institutional networks and actors involved in facilitating migration, with subsequent research typically following two analytical pathways. One strand focuses on the formal sector, drawing on neoclassical economic frameworks to investigate how brokers and labor market intermediaries strategically "channel" migration flows (Groutsis, van den Broek, and Harvey 2015; McCollum and Findlay 2015; van Eerbeek and Hedberg 2021). The other strand examines the informal sector, emphasizing unauthorized, economically-motivated actors such as smugglers and criminal networks (Vogt 2018; Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022). The term *migration industry* emerged as a unifying concept, referring to the networks of economically-driven actors, organizations, and institutions that facilitate, manage, and profit from migration (Hernández-León 2013).

Recent migration industry scholarship adopts three dominant perspectives. The structuralist approach conceptualizes the migration industry as a constellation of formal and informal actors, including private brokers, NGOs, and particular state officials or agencies, that mediate between individual migrants and state structures, often entrenching broader systems of inequality and control (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013). The labor market approach focuses especially on how recruitment agencies and intermediaries facilitate and profit from the transnational supply and demand for migrant labor (Groutsis, van den Broek, and Harvey 2015; McCollum and Findlay 2015). The mobilities approach examines how migration industries regulate mobility through technologies, services, and infrastructures that operate across space and time, challenging static, state-centric understandings of movement (Koh and Wissink 2018).

Using Nicaragua as a case study, we intervene in the migration industry literature by foregrounding the state's ability to play a direct entrepreneurial role as a profit-seeking actor actively constructing, facilitating, and extracting revenues from a global transit migration industry, behavior that we term *transit migration entrepreneurship*. Rather than the state being a secondary player, the Nicaraguan case demonstrates how an authoritarian regime can

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quickly design, promote, and control migration flows to generate revenue through measures such as dropping visa requirements, organizing charter flights, and leveraging formal and informal commercial arrangements. This case shows that states can be leading commercial actors in migration industries, while enjoying power and tools of sovereignty that non-state actors lack. While Nicaragua's transit migration industry produced official state revenues, unofficial payments, and opportunities for state actors to extract private income from bribes and other fees, we describe this as a profit-seeking strategy because the state's goal was to increase revenues beyond necessary baseline funding for migration and border authorities. After discussing the methodology, we used to analyze the Nicaraguan case and conceptualize transit migration entrepreneurship, we introduce the different elements of TME in practice.

Methodological approach

We began this study by analyzing the Nicaraguan government's response to increasing transit migration through Central America by both migrants from South America and the Caribbean and extracontinental migrants. Thaler has been researching Nicaraguan politics for over a decade and in 2022 began noticing increasing reports of migrants flying to Nicaragua to transit onward toward the United States, which was not part of historical migration patterns in the region, and contacted Shalaby, who has expertise around borders and migration, to collaborate. These backgrounds enabled us to draw informed inferences about the Nicaraguan government's motives and contextualize its policies and actions in relation to the migration literature.

Given our focus on understanding new empirical developments in a single case, we did not begin with a theory to deductively test but instead started collecting data from varied sources, as discussed below. Through our case study, we then inductively developed the transit migration entrepreneurship concept and framework, as our review of the migration governance literature found that existing concepts and theories did not adequately explain the Nicaraguan government's rapid change in its approach to transit migration, making it a deviant case (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 302) requiring a new approach.

We focus empirically on analyzing Nicaragua to illustrate novel, understudied dynamics in a single case. Beyond this descriptive analysis, however, we compare what we observe in Nicaragua to existing explanations developed from other cases, drawing on principles of process tracing to weigh our preferred explanation for Nicaraguan policies (financial gain) against alternative explanations. Placing the Nicaraguan case in comparative perspective also allows us to inductively generate a conceptual framework and hypotheses that may generalize and be tested in other contexts (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007), going beyond "mere description" (Gerring 2012). We return to the question of generalizability in the conclusion.

Since March 2022, shortly after waves of Cuban and Haitian migration through Nicaragua began in late 2021, we tracked daily reporting on migration policies and transit migration flows through Nicaragua in independent Nicaraguan and international news outlets in English and Spanish. We visited Nicaraguan news sites and received daily Google News alerts for any stories related to Nicaragua. This work continued Thaler's prior practices tracking news about the Nicaraguan regime's internal politics, international relations, and economic management, while now focusing more specifically on articles related to migration and border control. We also reviewed earlier reporting and documents to ensure an accurate understanding of Nicaraguan migration policies and practices before 2022. We prioritized Nicaraguan news outlets with reputations for reliability and good in-country sources

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(*Confidencial*, *La Prensa*, and Divergentes) and major international newswires and outlets (e.g., Associated Press, Reuters, *El País*). While independent Nicaraguan outlets are generally critical of the government, we focus on reported facts, rather than opinion, and balanced these sources with the government's own information and discourse. The Nicaraguan government tried to obscure aspects of the operation of the transit migration industry, including the exact revenues it generates, but we analyzed available statements and policies around migration from official government documents, speeches by Ortega and Murillo, and government-run news outlet *El 19*.

From thousands of total articles about Nicaraguan politics, we clipped to a shared folder in Evernote over 300 news items specifically related to migration to/through Nicaragua and the government's migration and border-related policies. We then took notes on the articles in a shared Google Docs file and coded how they aligned or diverged from existing migration theories. Both authors commented on each item to ensure we reached consensus about how to interpret Nicaraguan government policies and actions discussed therein, how they related to existing explanations, and whether they appeared oriented toward domestic political concerns or international relations and audiences. As we analyzed data and assessed its fit with existing explanations of state behavior regarding migrants, our coding began especially focusing on whether Nicaraguan policies and practices aligned with (1) aims of revenue generation or (2) weaponized migration against the United States. We also draw on other news articles in discussing Nicaragua's broader political and economic political context.

We additionally examined non-governmental organization and think tank reports and US government statements and sanctions related to Nicaragua, primarily from the White House, State Department, and Treasury Department. The Nicaraguan government's lack of transparency makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions about its intentions regarding transit migration, but these diverse sources offer us as accurate a view as possible to understand the government's motivations, analyze the case, and weigh our profit-seeking argument against other potential explanations.

Transit migration entrepreneurship

Weaponization theories would expect the Nicaraguan state to be facilitating transit migration primarily to coerce neighboring states or, especially, the United States. Instrumentalization theories would expect Nicaragua to either block transit migrants or prevent their onward passage to gain rents or diplomatic concessions, or to use transit migration for reputational benefits. The migration industry literature, meanwhile, would expect private actors and perhaps individual state officials (rather than the government as a whole) to be at the center of managing and extracting revenues from transit migration.

While elements of the Nicaraguan case at first glance align with the weaponization, instrumentalization, and migration industry frameworks discussed above, we argue that the Ortega–Murillo regime's entrepreneurial leveraging of transit migrants for revenue gains diverges from these theories and represents a new type of migration governance. We characterize this phenomenon of a government proactively building a transit migration industry for economic gain as TME. While other states might accept migrants transiting across their territory in expectation of them potentially benefiting the domestic economy by spending money en route, governments engaging in TME actively promote transit migration and construct an industry through dropping visa requirements and collaborating with transportation providers and brokers abroad. In doing so, they act entrepreneurially by identifying a market opportunity in migrants' hopes of reaching a proximate destination country and desires to avoid barriers and dangers elsewhere (reaching the United States and avoiding the Darién

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Gap, respectively, in the Nicaraguan case). Governments using TME provide the "service" of passage through the country to generate revenues, rather than for humanitarian reasons. These governments may pursue this venture despite pushback from international actors and attempts at "regulation" through sanctions, and they do so instead of engaging in rentierism and seeking payments for curtailing onward migration.

TME can be carried out through a mix of formal and informal means. Nicaragua's government has signed formal agreements with other countries to drop entry visa requirements, and it also published new official policies and constitutional provisions around migration. In keeping with the ruling Ortega–Murillo regime's predilection for informality and ambiguity, the transit migration industry was also built with secret arrangements, opaque commercial agreements, collaborations with independent actors, and arbitrariness in changing and enforcing policies. This mix of formality and informality both leverages the protections and privileges of sovereignty and helps evade international and domestic accountability efforts, as informal practices make it easier to hide revenues and offer more opportunities for extortion or soliciting bribes. Other governments pursuing TME might land on different balances of formal and informal practices depending on their domestic and international political environments, but combining both is likely necessary to successfully carry out TME.

A state's ability to construct a viable transit migration industry, however, ultimately depends on its geographic location along existing migration routes and/or proximate to a destination country, as well as its ability to withstand any pressures to curtail transit migration. Geographically, Nicaragua has benefited from lying north of the treacherous Darién Gap and from its relative proximity to the United States, millions of migrants' preferred destination and one perceived, at least until 2025, as more accessible than European Union (EU) states. Geopolitically, Nicaragua's authoritarian regime and status as a pariah state in the eyes of the United States, EU, and other prominent international actors meant these actors had limited leverage to push the Nicaraguan government to change course, even as other Latin American countries accepted US migration policy pressures. Whether these favorable geographic and political conditions are common or rare, when they exist, TME may not always emerge, since governments must choose to pursue it.

Figure 2 demonstrates how opportunities from migration patterns and incentives to generate revenues may then lead a state to engage in TME.

To show how TME works in practice, we now detail the specific workings of transit migration entrepreneurship in the Nicaraguan case. We then analyze how Nicaragua diverges from the key migration literatures we discuss above, highlighting TME's conceptual and empirical value.

Democratic erosion and economic decline in Nicaragua

As a Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) commander, Daniel Ortega led the revolutionary junta that took power after overthrowing the US-backed Somoza dictatorship in 1979. Ortega was first elected president in 1984 and then lost the 1990 elections that ended

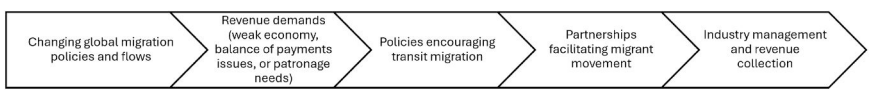


Figure 2. Opportunities, incentives and TME development.

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the civil war pitting US-backed Contra rebels against the FSLN government. After unsuccessful candidacies in 1996 and 2001, Ortega won elections and returned to the presidency in 2007. Ortega and the FSLN then proceeded to erode Nicaragua's young democracy (see, e.g., Close 2016).

Growing authoritarianism

Ortega reversed FSLN ideals to centralize his own power in the party and the country, producing a series of repressive, anti-democratic laws and policies including: overturning the 1995 constitutional provision banning consecutive presidential terms; refusing to allow independent election observers; suppressing opposition parties; appointing his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice president in the fraudulent 2016 elections; silencing media outlets; eliminating barriers between internal and external security, allowing Ortega to use coercion against any person or entity "threatening" Nicaragua; and surveilling and shuttering civil society organizations (Cortés Ramos, López Baltodano, and Moncada Bellorin 2020; Jarquín 2016; Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler and Mosinger 2022). These authoritarian measures concentrated power and reduced mechanisms of accountability and oversight, providing enabling conditions for the Ortega–Murillo regime to engage in TME.

The regime and Nicaragua's politics entered a new phase in 2018. Financial support from Venezuela dwindled, restricting government revenues and spending, but Ortega, Murillo, and their cronies continued siphoning off state funds while further eroding political and civil liberties. When the regime suddenly announced pension cuts in April 2018, small demonstrations broke out, which FSLN thugs attacked, sparking new, larger protests (Cabrales Domínguez 2020; Mosinger et al. 2022). Ortega's regime retaliated violently against protesters, with the mid-2018 conflict and crackdown resulting in the deaths of 332 civilians and 23 police officers and thousands of injuries (Amnesty International 2018; GIEI 2018).

Thousands of other civilians were arrested or harassed and threatened, catalyzing a mass exodus (Human Rights Watch 2019). Between 2018 and 2023, over 900,000 Nicaraguans fled the country and at least 440,260 sought asylum around the world (EFE 2024; Navarrete and Artículo 66 2025). From 2018 and 2023, 5,500 nonprofits were closed, and in August 2024, the government banned 1,500 more organizations, leaving the FSLN party-state as most people's only resource for services and aid (Robles 2024). Ortega's regime also stripped citizenship status for students, journalists, literary figures, and human rights defenders labeled as "traitors" and "foreign agents" (Confidencial 2024).

In late 2024, legislators approved a wide-ranging constitutional revision that strengthened the Ortega–Murillo dictatorship by: making Murillo co-president; increasing the presidential term from 5 to 6 years; extending the dictatorship's control over all "legislative, judicial, electoral, control and supervisory bodies, regional and municipal"; increasing control over the media; and legalizing expulsion and banishment of Nicaraguans deemed a "social risk" (Al Jazeera 2024).

US governments were not necessarily happy with Nicaragua's earlier democratic erosion, beginning with the 2011 vote that was labelled "the least transparent national election in Nicaragua in the last 20 years" (Carter Center 2014). Despite the democratic decline, however, the United States and Nicaragua continued cooperating in areas such as anti-drug trafficking operations and, most notably, monitoring and controlling migration (Thaler 2017: 163).

From 2015 to 2017, Nicaragua prevented entry for a surge of Cuban and African migrants seeking refuge and pathways north. Nicaragua's "muro de contención" (wall of containment) strategy was influenced by US language and policies on impeding organized crime and human and drug trafficking (Silva 2018; Winters and Mora Izaguirre 2019). In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nicaragua closed its border with Costa Rica when African and Haitian migrants were seeking to

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transit north (Murillo and Miranda 2020). The recent embrace of transit migration therefore represents a stark contrast with the Ortega–Murillo regime's past approaches to immigration. It has emerged in the context of worsening relations with the United States, which has sanctioned regime officials, their allies, and associated businesses, and of broader economic headwinds that generated demand for new revenues.

Economic struggles and incentives for TME

We argue that turbulent economic conditions in Nicaragua and a desire for funds led the Ortega–Murillo regime to develop a transit migration industry as a supplemental revenue source. As Central America's poorest country and the second-poorest in the Western hemisphere, Nicaragua relies heavily on remittances, which represent 25–30 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (World Bank 2024), making it Latin America's most remittance-dependent nation. In 2024, the country received $5.24 billion in remittances, and during the first quarter of 2025, Nicaragua reached a new record of remittances at $1.44 billion (all values in this article are in US dollars), a 26.3 per cent increase compared to a year earlier (Divergentes and Artículo 66 2025). Nicaragua's economic growth, however, fell due to decreasing production in agriculture, manufacturing, and livestock industries (World Bank 2024). The tourism sector, which had been growing rapidly up until 2018, failed to fully recover or return to sustained growth since then, diminishing another potential source of foreign exchange (Divergentes 2025) and incentivizing a search for other revenue sources, like transit migration.

Political upheaval in 2018 had severe consequences for Nicaragua's macroeconomic stability. Nicaragua's foreign reserve holdings fell from $2.76 billion in 2017 to $2.26 billion in 2018. Domestic capital flight became a worry amid the 2018 unrest, as Nicaraguans looked to move billions of dollars in assets abroad; this was a serious problem since Nicaragua lacked formal capital controls until 2024 (Olivares 2024; State Department 2019). This likely made other options for replenishing foreign reserves and maintaining bank stability appealing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic further contracted Nicaragua's economy.[3]

Revenue options, however, have gradually narrowed in the face of international sanctions targeted at regime members and associated companies since 2018, and the 2023 removal of Ortega and Murillo's ally Dante Mossi as leader of the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, a key financer (Miranda Aburto 2023; Divergentes 2024a). In a highly trade-dependent country, US sanctions targeting key industries like mining have created deep economic uncertainty. Sanctions against regime-associated companies also made it more difficult to directly funnel patronage to regime allies.

Intent on preventing domestic dissent and any renewed challenges to their rule, Ortega and Murillo have ignored international pressure for greater democratic freedoms, even as the economic costs of doing so accumulated, creating incentives to seek new revenue sources that would not require political compromise. The Ortega–Murillo regime's total centralization of control makes it easy to quickly change policies and take advantage of identified economic opportunities. The regime found one in transit migration, which offered a way to generate needed income to shore up the economy and pay to keep the government's employees and associates loyal.

The mechanics and economics of transit migration entrepreneurship in Nicaragua

The Ortega–Murillo regime's migration industry moved through different phases over time, first generating revenues at land borders beginning in 2020, then facilitating transit migration

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by air and then sea to generate increased revenues from late 2021–2024, before responding to falling transit migration in 2025 with exorbitant charges for citizens returning to Nicaragua.

Efforts to use migration for more revenue began with a new migration law in August 2020. This law established a $150 fee for citizens and migrants alike crossing a "unauthorized border points" to pay to soldiers or migration officials, who often charged higher amounts to migrants, but avoided receipts or passport stamps to limit records of migrants' transiting the country (Divergentes and Artículo 66 2025).[4] Revenue from these new fees at land borders likely encouraged the Nicaraguan state to soon embrace migration by air.

The practice of using air travel to Nicaragua to then migrate toward the United States became common in November 2021 when Nicaragua dropped visa requirements for Cubans, prompting thousands to fly to Managua, with Haitians also following this path. Migrants began their journeys in their home countries or another transit country by purchasing tickets to Nicaragua for high fares. Using Nicaragua to start migrating northward toward the United States effectively allows individuals to avoid the Darién Gap route, where at least 538 migrants died or went missing from 2015 to 2024 (Missing Migrants Project 2025), and word of the apparent ease and safety of traveling to and through Nicaragua began spreading through social media platforms and attracting other global migrants.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlighted the success of this new route through Nicaragua and its northern neighbors, stating that "African and Cuban migrants are increasingly choosing air routes to reach Central American countries, avoiding the Darien jungle" (Diaz and Botts 2023). There was a 65 per cent decrease in African migrants crossing the Darién Gap from 2021 to 2022, with at least a significant portion of this drop likely due to them opting for Nicaragua's alternative air routes (Runde and Bryja 2024).

From August-October 2023, over 260 charter flights flew 30,000 Haitians to Nicaragua, or 60 per cent of all Haitian migrants who arrived at the United States–Mexico border, while about 50 flights from Havana landed in Nicaragua each month, carrying approximately 5,700 passengers monthly, or 40 per cent of Cubans documented at the United States–Mexico border (Janetsky 2023b).[5] Migrant numbers increased further between May 2023 and May 2024 as approximately 153,400 passengers arrived in Managua from Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (Chamorro 2024). Migrants from Africa and Asia took different routes to Managua, such as from Senegal via Morocco, Spain, or Türkiye (Montoya, Morel, and Pascual 2024); from India or Uzbekistan via eastern Libya (Gasteli 2024); or from India via the United Arab Emirates, the route of a flight detained in France during a refueling stop en route to Managua in late 2023 (Charlton and Maqbool 2023).

While transit migrants traveling to Nicaragua via commercial flights could have initially been an organic phenomenon, in a country as tightly controlled as Nicaragua, the rapid rise in charter flights—especially from countries without previous transport links to Nicaragua—would only have been possible with the government actively developing this new industry. Nicaragua's government used a shady intermediary company (Easy Aviation, registered in the United States) to broker and organize charter flights, attempting to disguise the arrival of some charter flights carrying migrants by not registering them with the national airports administration, while maintaining close control of the Managua airport through the police and military (Chamorro 2024; Confidencial 2023b; La Prensa 2024b). Given the centralization of power in Nicaragua, this operation would not have been possible without regime leadership embracing it, in contrast to migration industry and smuggling theories where state actors are peripheral players, if involved at all.

The government typically charges charter flights a $2,000–3,000 landing fee, at least officially. While there was likely variation month-to-month, in October 2023, records indicate a

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daily average of 18 charter flights landing in Managua, amounting to a lower estimate of around $1.08 million per month in landing fees alone (Miranda Aburto 2023). This revenue was sorely needed: increases in landing fees helped the state-run Managua airport recover economically from deficits developed with the fall of air traffic and tourism due to the 2018 crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Miranda Aburto and Quintero 2023). Once arrived, every foreigner is obligated to pay a $10 tourist fee, with exemptions for Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans. Migrants, however, were also reportedly charged an additional and arbitrary $150–200 entry fee to extract further funds (Miranda Aburto 2023). As Orozco stated, "There are airport taxes that every individual has to pay, and it ranges from $100 to $200 per person. But when we're talking about economies of this scale, then it becomes a multimillion-dollar operation" (Contreras, Kenin, and Kelly 2024).

Rather than seeking to keep migrants in the country to economically contribute through sustained labor and consumption or to extract rents from other states, Nicaragua's government then encouraged a quick passage for transit migrants. Visas sold on arrival at the airport required individuals to exit the country within 96 hours; some individuals noted that officials may not provide documentation or will issue a handwritten receipt without stamping their passports (Miranda Aburto 2023). The government provided little clarity on why it moved migrants through so quickly, but given Nicaragua's own economic struggles and limited formal employment opportunities, there is little demand for migrant labor. In addition, the government's fear of renewed unrest may mean it wants to forestall any risks of conflict emerging between local communities and migrants, as occurs in other countries.

After arriving in Nicaragua, migrants travel north toward the United States–Mexico border, typically through Honduras. Migrants may use taxi or bus services to reach Honduras, with taxi drivers reportedly averaging "between three and four trips a week" from the Managua airport and charging $50 per migrant when flights were arriving with some frequency (La Prensa 2023). However, Nicaraguan authorities then prohibited taxi and private car services from transporting migrants, with local drivers complaining that the government and its employees "are seeking to take over this income and use buses, they want to take over so they're using all these pretexts and restrictions against us" (La Prensa 2023). The government increasingly used its own buses to transport migrants and control their movement, rather than allowing them to take cheaper local buses to the Honduran border for $3–6 (La Prensa 2023). At the airport and along routes toward the border, various businesses were created to serve transit migrants by offering SIM cards and phone services, housing, transportation, and meals. Government affiliates were disproportionately positioned to benefit from these new markets, given the state's efforts to control transit migrants' flow from the airport to the northern border. This exclusion of private actors illustrates the importance state officials placed on extracting and controlling revenues from the transit migration industry, rather than allowing it to develop in a more decentralized manner as existing literature would expect.

Amid economic struggles from the fallout of the 2018 protests and repression, sanctions on government officials and affiliates, and the COVID-19 pandemic, transit migration offered the Ortega–Murillo regime an effective means to diversify revenue sources. Charter flights charged migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean between $1,250 and $10,000, while migrants from further away paid fees of up to $10,000 from Africa and between $72,000 and $96,000 from India (Rosenberg et al., 2024). The private companies operating these charters then passed along revenues to the Nicaraguan government through a range of fees or informal payments. Local Nicaraguan operators offered package services in collaboration with the government, often including managing flight documents, processing entry fees and

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forms, providing accommodations in Managua, and coordinating further movement toward the US border (Looney 2024).

In addition to Nicaragua's new status as a favorite destination for charter flights carrying migrants, sea routes from Colombia to Nicaragua became increasingly popular alternatives to the Darién. While many of those taking the sea route were Venezuelan, migrants from elsewhere in the world can also fly to Colombia's mainland before traveling by boat to Colombia's San Andrés Island and from there to Nicaragua's nearby Corn Islands, although unpredictable seas and predatory individuals still make it a dangerous journey (Collins 2024; La Prensa 2025a; Yeung 2024). The Nicaraguan government reportedly embraced the sea route for migrants, especially after increasing crackdowns by the United States and other governments on charter flights in 2023 and 2024 threatened the airborne transit migration industry (La Prensa 2025a). Maritime migration offered an additional revenue source, as, on top of normal entry costs, migration authorities reportedly demanded "fines" and other fees of $150 or more from migrants intercepted at sea or arriving on the Corn Islands and abused those who did not pay (Confidencial 2023a). These maritime passages exemplify the Ortega–Murillo regime's entrepreneurial nature in looking for ways to opportunistically expand its transit migration industry and adapt to changes in migration flows and international conditions.

Transit migration benefitted the Nicaraguan regime both through direct revenues for the state institutions controlled by Ortega and Murillo and by offering opportunities for state officials and government employees to extract their own private payments. Such informal revenues can help reduce demands for more official pay from the state while still maintaining loyalty. Officially, income from migration services provided by the government, including visas, airport terminal fees, and "other services" rose rapidly after a low point in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic (see Fig. 3), reaching over $50 million in 2023 (La Prensa 2024a; Divergentes and Artículo 66 2025). These numbers likely reflect only a portion of the overall revenue gains the government enjoyed as transit migration increased. And, as tourism rebounded very slowly after the COVID-19 pandemic (Divergentes 2025), it is unlikely these

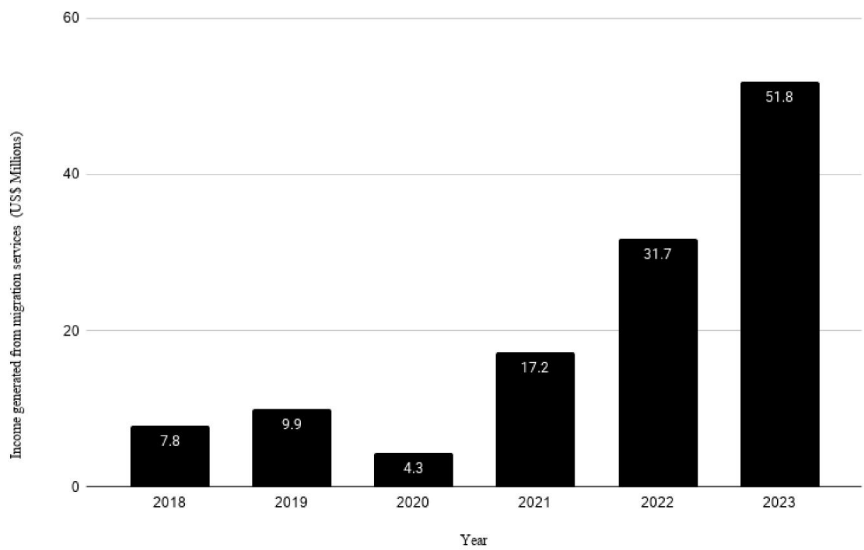


Figure 3. Income generated from migration services in Nicaragua, 2018–2023. Adapted from La Prensa (2024a).

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migration services revenue jumps are due to other sources beyond the transit migration industry.

While not lucrative enough to offset major macroeconomic shocks, transit migration provided the Nicaraguan government with a way to maintain airport and immigration operations, replenish some of its foreign reserve stores, and maintain loyalists' support through patronage and opportunities for income from bribes and extortion. It is notable that the nebulous "other services" was the most lucrative and fastest-growing category of revenues from migration services from 2018 to 2023 (see Fig. 4), where lack of transparency is likely intentional to create opportunities for graft.[6]

Figure 5 shows how the elements of the TME process played out in the Nicaraguan case and the government's implementation of specific measures.

Under the Biden administration, the US government was frustrated by the new Nicaraguan air routes, complaining that the Ortega–Murillo regime is "profiting quite substantially off of facilitation of irregular migrants" heading to the United States (White House 2024). The second Trump administration continued and escalated criticism of the regime, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio labelling Ortega and Murillo as "enemies of humanity" for their part in "creat[ing] a migration crisis" through domestic repression and facilitating transit migration (US Embassy Managua 2025a). The United States has tried to crack down on transit migration via Nicaragua, sanctioning Nicaraguan government officials and some of their charter company partners, reportedly helping discontinue certain charter routes (e.g., State Department 2024b, 2024c; US Embassy Managua 2025b). However, it seems unlikely

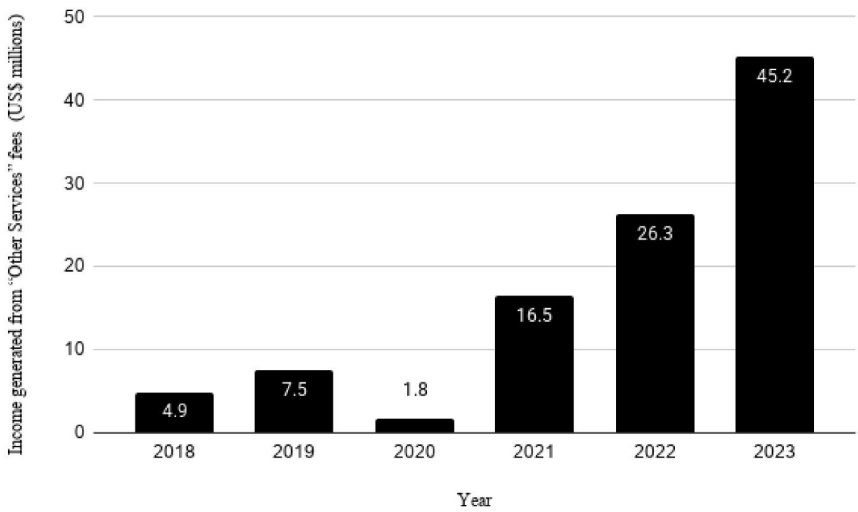


Figure 4. Reported "Other Services" migration fee revenues in Nicaragua, 2018–2023. Adapted from La Prensa (2024a).

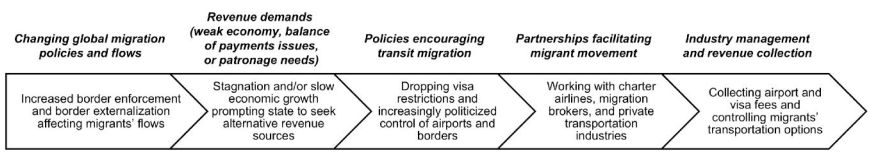


Figure 5. Transit migration entrepreneurship elements in the Nicaraguan case.

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these efforts will deter the Ortega–Murillo regime from keeping their transit migration industry running whenever there is demand from migrants. In fact, even as migration toward the United States plummeted after the staunchly anti-immigrant second Trump administration took office in early 2025, thousands of Cuban and Haitian migrants continued traveling to Nicaragua and then to the Honduran border (La Prensa 2025b). This demonstrates the Ortega–Murillo regime's resistance to international pressure, as US criticism and sanctions on regime officials and charter companies failed to stop Nicaragua's transit migration industry. While this might create the impression that Nicaragua has weaponized migration against the United States, as we discuss below, there are few indications that Nicaragua's government is using transit migration to coerce the United States into policy changes, with antagonizing the United States perhaps a fringe benefit of the regime's revenue-seeking strategy.

In the short term, Nicaragua's government may seek to recoup lost revenues from falling migration through other informal means, such as deepening its involvement in drug transshipment (Blume 2022; Rocha, Rodgers, and Weegels 2023; La Prensa 2024c), which the March 2026 seizure of $100 million worth of cocaine shipped from Nicaragua to the United Kingdom suggests may be happening (Confidencial 2026b). Nicaragua's government has likewise allowed increasing levels of legal and illegal gold mining over the past several years in exchange for payments, but illegal mining has spiked recently, including moving Costa Rican gold into Nicaragua (Oakland Institute 2024; Murillo 2026). This helps demonstrate the importance of political will: Ortega and Murillo chose to leverage control over migration and pursue TME despite the availability of other sources for increased revenues. They are also now using migration control to target their own citizens. Since 2025, there have been consistent reports of the government charging exorbitant fees into the tens of thousands of dollars to allow citizens who traveled abroad to reenter Nicaragua (Miranda Aburto 2025b; Mogollón 2025), helping replace some of the lost revenues from dwindling transit migration.

In early February 2026, the Nicaraguan government reimposed entry visa requirements on citizens of 128 countries, including Cuba (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería 2026). This came in the wake of the US seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and a US blockade of Cuba, and so it appears clearly aligned with other measures the Ortega-Murillo regime was taking, such as political prisoner releases, to try to avoid increased US pressure on Nicaragua (EFE 2026).[7] As other analysts noted, however, the new visa requirements came *after* migrant flows steeply dropped, meaning transit migration had already ceased to be a major revenue source for the regime; meanwhile, the new "consultative" visa for Cubans, the most common group continuing to migrate through Nicaragua, is free and can be applied for online, and, if desired, could easily be granted to all applicants (Confidencial 2026a). The Ortega–Murillo regime's policy changes are designed to give the appearance of addressing US concerns about transit migration when it is not costly to do so, while also limiting conflict with Cuba, a longtime ally. Furthermore, the authoritarian nature of the government means policies could be quickly reversed and visa barriers dropped again to revitalize TME if desired. Figure 6 summarizes the trajectory of Nicaragua's state-run migration industry from 2020 to 2026.

An atypical approach to instrumentalization and industry building

Focusing on the three key literatures we identified earlier—weaponized migration, migrant and refugee instrumentalization, and the migration industry—we now analyze how the Nicaraguan case fits with or diverges from existing work. Table 1 below demonstrates how

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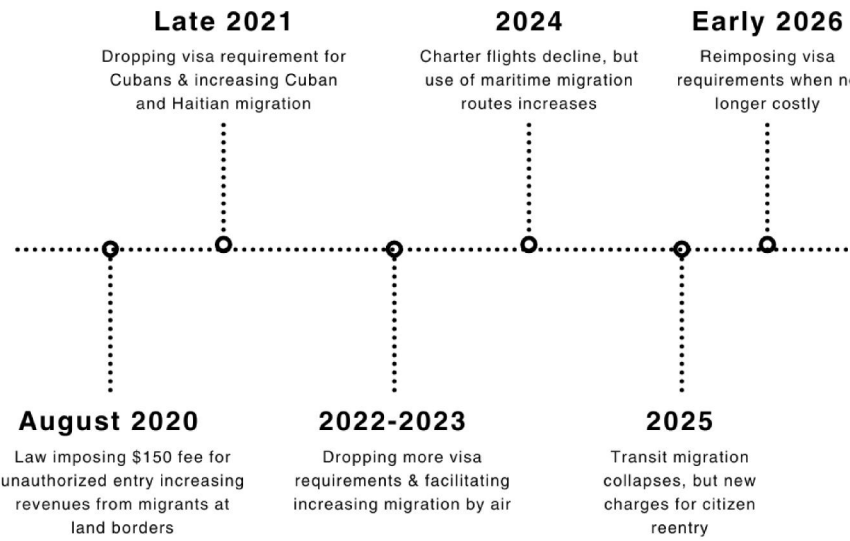


Figure 6. State policies and the migration industry in Nicaragua, 2020–2026.

Nicaragua does not neatly meet the criteria for any of these concepts and is better characterized as a case of TME.

Some analysts described Ortega and Murillo as weaponizing migration against the United States (e.g., Orozco 2024; Pallais Arana 2024), and when we began our study we expected to find a close match with "coercive engineered migration" in Greenhill's (2010) weaponized migration framework. Nicaragua has contributed to turbulence in the United States by facilitating flows of migrants and refugees to the United States' southern border during a time of increasingly inflammatory anti-immigration discourse, potentially aligning with the tactic of generating migration flows to create "unrest" in a target state (Greenhill 2010). Yet, we argue this is not Ortega's and Murillo's primary motivation. Rather, they are manipulating movement with a specific focus on revenue gains, not coercion. If the regime was primarily interested in coercing the United States, it could simply allow more migrants to pass through Nicaragua, rather than developing policies and amending the constitution to allow for imposing new fees and generating additional revenues from migration.

In his speeches, Ortega criticizes US and Western European migration policies as overly restrictive and condemns sanctions as harming economies and spurring emigration (Selser 2022; Ortega 2024). However, Ortega has talked about these issues in broad terms, rather than a weaponization approach of stating a demand for sanctions relief in exchange for restricting migration. While Ortega may have tried to impose a "hypocrisy cost" (Greenhill 2010) by highlighting the ostensibly liberal US and European Union's oppressive immigration policies, Nicaragua's government has not sought to benefit symbolically from its transit migration industry by promoting it through official channels as a humanitarian endeavor or an example for other countries.

In opening their borders and seeking profit, the Nicaraguan government's behavior resembles migration rentierism, yet the migration and refugee rentierism literature places a large emphasis on host states' diplomatic motivations and extraction of payments from the Global North. Global North funding for providing refugee and/or migrant care is not a central concern for Nicaragua and has not been offered. Nicaragua's government is not seeking payment from the United States for keeping migrants within its borders. The Ortega–Murillo

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Table 1. Nicaraguan case's fit with or divergence from key migration theories and literatures.

Literature/theory	Key insights	Similarities to Nicaragua	Nicaragua's divergence
Weaponized migration	States (typically Global South) use migration processes to weaponize migrants politically and economically against other states (typically Global North)	• Migrants' intended final destination (the United States) is a rival state	• Not weaponizing migrants against the United States for coercive purposes
Migrant and refugee instrumentalization	Countries (typically Global South) leverage their geopolitical positions to gain income or symbolic benefits from other states (typically Global North) in return for keeping migrants/refugees within their borders	• Generating profit from movement and migration	• Not seeking to earn money from other states by keeping migrants within the territory • Symbolic gains are a beneficial side effect of migration industry, not a primary goal
Migration Industry	Refers to networks of informal and formal actors and institutions profiting from migration; usually focusing on private markets and brokers, smugglers, and intermediaries beyond the state	• Generating money from migration • State actors may collaborate with private actors in facilitating migration	• State is the central actor using tools of sovereignty and administrative apparatus to construct and profit from migration industry

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regime is taking advantage of people's desire to migrate and reach the United States, but unlike in other countries they are not trying to keep people within Nicaragua to generate rents over the medium-to-long-term through labor or taxation (e.g., Phillips and Missbach 2017; Thiollet 2024). Instead, Nicaragua's government is focusing on shorter-term rents by allowing people to pass through the country in a very limited amount of time, capped at four days for most transit migrants. Despite low domestic support, Nicaragua's regime is also not welcoming migrants to use them for votes (see Sadiq 2005), as the authoritarian system lets Ortega and Murillo freely manipulate elections.

The Nicaraguan case resonates more with the refugee commodification literature, which emphasizes economic gains over political ones. The Ortega–Murillo regime can profit from manipulating migration patterns and commodifying governing technologies, such as visas and airport landing fees. For example, in 2023, Nicaragua experienced a 62 per cent increase from 2022 in money earned from migration-related fees, demonstrating the country's commitment to growing its transit migration industry (La Prensa 2024a), although still without integrating migrants into labor markets.

In this sense, what Nicaragua's government built through transit migration entrepreneurship is a type of migration industry. Existing migration industry frameworks have largely conceptualized the industry as a network of actors including brokers, smugglers, recruitment agencies, and NGOs who facilitate, mediate, and profit from migration processes (Salt and Stein 1997; Kyle and Liang 2001; Hernández-León 2013). Across the migration industry literature, however, the state is often a bystander responding to or managing the behavior of other actors and institutions, or perhaps individual state officials or agencies are accomplices to more important economic actors (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013; Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018). The state, however, can be a central actor in the creation, proliferation, and maintenance of migration industries to govern migration and generate revenues. In Nicaragua, the state actively constructed and directly managed a migration industry by dropping visa requirements, coordinating with charter flight companies, and monopolizing domestic transportation and migration-related services. Some migration industry literature discusses how states may indirectly benefit from migration increasing the labor supply (Groutsis, van den Broek, and Harvey 2015; McCollum and Findlay 2015), yet the state's central role in Nicaragua, leveraging its sovereignty, allowed the regime to generate revenues more directly.

Finally, the migration industry literature often discusses smuggling as a form of governance or a type of informal market that defies a state's sovereign control (Peña 2021). In this case, the US government has charged the Nicaraguan state with perpetuating human trafficking and illicit smuggling activities (State Department 2024a; US Department of the Treasury 2024), raising both conceptual and policy questions. We do not view the Ortega–Murillo regime itself as engaging in smuggling.[8] The Nicaraguan state instead is controlling opportunities for smugglers and, perhaps, acting as an accessory for smugglers, whether permitting unauthorized crossings from Costa Rica, allowing air and sea entries in exchange for fees, or allowing exit at unofficial points along the Honduran border.

Nicaragua's government is using its geographic position, sovereignty, and legal and administrative tools to allow and control movement into and out of the country, rather than acting clandestinely. Migrants willingly purchase tickets to Nicaragua and are legally allowed to enter by the government. Unlike the greater role of informal actors in most accounts of smuggling, Nicaragua's state has stepped in to formally manage transit migration and ensure that the Ortega-Murillo regime keeps the lion's share of revenues. This is clearly exemplified by the government banning private taxis from taking migrants from the Managua airport to the northern border in favor of government-controlled buses (La Prensa 2023), and then later

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allowing certain taxis to operate from the airport in exchange for licensing fees (Divergentes 2024b). The Nicaraguan state also has the sovereign power to regulate exit, and there is little evidence of the Nicaraguan state itself spiriting (or forcing) migrants across the border, though the government may have dropped migrants off near informal exit points where they know smugglers are active and migrants will cross without Honduran authorization.

Conclusion

Building from the Nicaraguan case and relevant migration literatures, we developed the concept of TME, a new model of migration governance and economic extraction in which the state is the central actor developing and seeking increased revenues from a migration industry. This strategy is facilitated by expanding border externalization policies that force migrants to look for new routes toward their desired destinations. Given the Ortega–Murillo regime's restriction of its own citizens' mobilities domestically and internationally, its active promotion of foreign transit migration appears strange, but we argue that this is explained by transit migration's potential economic benefits and geographic and political conditions that have enabled the regime to reap them.

Conditions conducive to transit migration entrepreneurship

Based on the Nicaraguan case, we hypothesize that TME is most likely to arise when four conditions are present: (1) an authoritarian or illiberal government able to quickly change policies and ignore dissent; (2) revenue demands due to a weak economy or needs for patronage to shore up regime support and security; (3) the political will to allow transit migration for economic purposes; and (4) indifference toward international sanctions or other diplomatic pressure. We encourage researchers to test whether these conditions hold in other contexts where governments are facilitating transit migration.

Nicaragua built a transit migration industry as quickly and easily as it did because the Ortega–Murillo regime's dictatorial rule meant policies could be developed and implemented with minimal domestic or international friction. Authoritarian or illiberal governments, therefore, may find it easiest to pursue TME. Centralized control enables rapid policy shifts and helps sidestep tradeoffs and potential pushback more democratic governments face when changing migration policies (see Natter 2024).

Governments sitting atop weak economies and with balance of payments issues may also be particularly likely to try to engage in TME, since it offers a means to gain increased revenues and foreign currency that the state can directly collect, without requiring more resource-intensive forms of taxation or investment. This direct state control also facilitates the use of these revenues to provide patronage for allies and supporters, which some governments may seek out regardless of macroeconomic conditions to maintain support and regime security.

A regime also must be willing to leverage transit migration in this manner, as some may eschew TME despite opportunities to engage in it. Regimes with particularly xenophobic politics might not want migrants passing through their country. Hungary under Viktor Orbán could have sought revenue from migrants seeking to enter from Serbia to then travel elsewhere in the EU, but instead shut its borders and violated EU asylum policies (e.g., Scott 2020). More generally, while fees from transit migrants might be easy to extract, regimes may choose to prioritize other economic opportunities or avoid TME to not upset neighbors or allies. El Salvador's authoritarian government under Nayib Bukele, for instance, has had opportunities to engage in TME as the country is, like Nicaragua, situated along migration

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routes and proximate to the United States. However, rather than facilitating transit migration, El Salvador's government tried to limit it by imposing new fees of over $1,000 on African and Indian travelers that it knew few could afford (Janetsky 2023a). Instead, Bukele's government pursued revenues elsewhere, engaging in rentierism and imprisoning US deportees in exchange for payments from the Trump administration (Renteria 2025).

Governments also need to be willing and able to withstand potential international pressure to curtail transit migration. Nicaragua's regime was already under international sanctions and pressure before starting up its transit migration industry. It has also shown little willingness to make meaningful and costly concessions, while seeking stronger ties with other authoritarian regimes in China, Russia, and elsewhere to insulate it from pressure. This obstinacy and willingness to accept costs and turn elsewhere for support reduces the leverage that the United States and its allies hold to force policy changes (see generally Levitsky and Way 2006). Regimes in similar situations of isolation from or rivalry with countries trying to reduce migration may therefore be more willing and able to engage in TME.

The future of Nicaragua's state-led transit migration industry is uncertain, especially given the rapid decline in migrants attempting to reach the US border beginning in 2025, and instead increasing reverse flows southward and toward migrants' origin destinations (e.g., Delacroix and Zamorano 2025; Guerra 2025). Yet, as we note above, Cuban and other migrants continued trying to use Nicaragua to at least cross the Honduran border northward (La Prensa 2025b). Despite new visa requirements, Nicaragua's government maintains flexibility to ramp up TME again if conditions change and more migrants begin trying to reach Mexico and the United States (Confidencial 2026a). Beyond Nicaragua, other similarly situated governments may look at its policies and experiences as an example of how TME can provide an economic boost or at least new opportunities for corruption.

Directions for further research

Two contemporary cases may offer useful comparisons with Nicaragua to see whether the TME framework holds. Belarus's authoritarian regime has been accused of weaponizing migration against the EU in response to sanctions, inviting transit migrants into its territory and then channeling them toward Poland, an EU member state (e.g., Forti 2023). Yet Belarus's government also actively promoted the country as an easy route to Europe (compared to crossing the Mediterranean), using travel agents around the Middle East and granting short-term tourist visas; migrants were then charged between $3,000 and $17,000 per person for their trips and their movements were carefully controlled by the government on arrival and en route to the border (Human Rights Watch 2021), similarly to in Nicaragua. In addition, Serbia under illiberal President Aleksandar Vučić was accused of weaponizing or instrumentalizing transit migration from Tunisia to pressure the EU into more favorable policies and potential membership for Serbia. Serbian government officials, however, had close ties to smuggling networks that were critical to facilitating migrants' movements (Meddeb 2023), and they may have leveraged this to generate new revenues for the state. Examining these cases can also help clarify when or how TME might complement other migration governance strategies, whether it is the primary motivation or a secondary one.

Further analysis is also needed regarding how states engage with different actors like foreign governments, airlines, travel agents, marketers, and brokers or "coyotes" when undertaking TME or facilitating the development of non-state transit migration industries. Economically-motivated nonstate actors may themselves undertake forms of TME when developing new migration routes, either avoiding state involvement or seeking to coopt government officials to ensure routes' viability.

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Testing the TME concept's generalizability is especially valuable as the number of transit migrants and transit migration routes continues expanding due to globalization and increasing migration restrictions (Collyer 2010; Schapendonk 2012). The Ortega–Murillo regime was able to use this to its advantage, quickly building a state-controlled transit migration industry in Nicaragua and earning millions of US dollars. Migrant flows toward the United States may rise again, and the Ortega–Murillo regime remains well positioned to benefit from renewed transit migration.

In the medium to long term, conflict, repression, poverty, and inequality, the major drivers of global migration, are not subsiding. New border restrictions and increased enforcement measures are unlikely to completely stop migrants now or in the future from trying to reach countries where they believe safety, freedom, and opportunity are more likely than at home. Whether in Nicaragua or elsewhere, some transit state governments may remain poised to try to help migrants reach their destinations, so long as they can profit.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

None declared.

Notes

1. Contrasting with many states using sovereignty to justify migrants' exclusion (e.g., Gelber and McDonald 2006).
2. States, however, can also effectively have migration flows or restrictions weaponized against them if targeted by a state on whom they depend for labor migration (Tsourapas 2018).
3. The World Bank (2024) and International Monetary Fund (2025), meanwhile, have both continued projecting a poor economic outlook and weak growth for Nicaragua.
4. Migrants and Nicaraguan citizens entering at official border points in late 2020 and 2021 had to pay $150 for a COVID-19 test, so the state made extra money wherever people crossed the border (Expediente Público 2021). The only way to avoid official government fees was going with smugglers through unauthorized border points, though smugglers themselves charged fees ranging from $33 to $250 depending on demand (Estrada Téllez 2020).
5. At one point in October 2023, 36 flights arrived from Haiti in three days (Olivares 2023).
6. The shadowy nature of the transit migration industry is in keeping with broader historical patterns of the regime opaquely using public resources to enrich the Ortega–Murillo family and cronies, like a proposed $50 billion interoceanic canal project announced in 2013 for which little work was ever completed. State institutions and regime allies instead used this project to grab land along the proposed canal route and skimmed money in the planning process (McCall and Taylor 2018; López Baltodano and López Baltodano 2022).
7. Nicaragua has a pattern, however, of releasing some political prisoners with great fanfare to relieve pressure and then quickly arresting other opponents (e.g., Miranda Aburto 2025a), demonstrating an unwillingness to meaningfully modify behavior to credibly seek US concessions.

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8. There is also no evidence of migrants' labor being exploited in Nicaragua, and the ninety-six-hour limit to leave the country would not allow significant labor, unlike in situations where revenues are generated by trafficking migrants for forced or indentured labor. Migrants might be exploited by other actors after leaving Nicaragua, but we have not seen evidence of this being organized prior to or during migrants' time in Nicaragua.

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