Impact of Border Control Policies on Cross-Border Dynamics in Mexico-Central America and Colombia-Venezuela, 2010-2020

Impacto de las políticas de control fronterizo en las dinámicas transfronterizas en México-Centroamérica y Colombia-Venezuela, 2010-2020

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the conditions directly impacting the migrant population in specific socio-historical contexts on the Colombia-Venezuela and Mexico-Central America borders. Here, a precarious situation worsens, aggravated by violence. These are conditions associated with problems of a political order, which highlight the role of persistent violence in the deterioration of a dignified life, precipitating the decision to migrate and turning mobility into the only strategy to preserve life. An examination of the particular circumstances shows that the changes in cross-border dynamics are related to state actions that favor border control, a persistent precariousness of the population in transit deepened by criminal activities and some social responses that oscillate between assistance and protection of the migrant population, alongside the hostility that accompanies stigmatization.

Keywords: 1. cross-border migration, 2. violence and human rights, 3. state action, 4. Mexico-Central America. 5. Colombia-Venezuela.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es subrayar las condiciones que impactan directamente a la población migrante en contextos sociohistóricos concretos en las fronteras Colombia-Venezuela y México-Centroamérica, donde se profundiza una situación precaria agravada por la violencia asociada a problemas de orden político. Dichas condiciones de deterioro precipitan la decisión de migrar y han convertido a la movilidad en la única estrategia para preservar la vida. Al examinar las circunstancias particulares, se evidencia que los cambios en las dinámicas transfronterizas están emparentados con una acción estatal que privilegia el control fronterizo y que la persistente precarización de la población en tránsito es acentuada por el accionar criminal. Así mismo, las respuestas sociales oscilan entre la asistencia y la protección de la población migrante, y la hostilidad que acompaña la estigmatización.

Palabras clave: 1. migración transfronteriza, 2. violencia y derechos humanos, 3. acción estatal, 4. México-Centroamérica, 5. Colombia-Venezuela.

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INTRODUCTION

The uniqueness of contemporary population movements requires examining certain entrenched commonplaces in the social imagination that have led to the perception of migration as a threat to global order, akin to organized crime and the trafficking of arms and drugs. In this context, violence is understood both as a catalyst for ongoing population mobility and as a means of controlling border flows, which often results in the violation of migrants' rights. This form of violence becomes normalized due to its prolonged duration, extending beyond its characterization as an action, phenomenon, or episode, without being equated to a state of war (González, 2006).[3] The analysis of the Colombia-Venezuela and Mexico-Northern Central America cases has facilitated the identification of similarities, differences, and trends in population movements within national contexts marked by violence, as well as the transformations occurring in transborder areas over the past decade. To this end, 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 26 for the Mexico-Central America case and 27 for the Colombia-Venezuela case.

Methodologically, this investigation adopts a qualitative approach with a comparative perspective: the two cases under examination share a common scenario characterized by the presence of various forms of violence in the migrants' places of origin, which manifest in distinct ways during the mobility process. The study delineates differences and potential trends in the transformation processes of transborder migration dynamics. In doing so, while acknowledging the shared impact of violence, the analysis accounts for the specificities of each national context and extrapolates potential explanatory trends that could enrich the discourse on changes in transborder migration in recent years.

It is recognized that the migratory process is dynamic, non-linear, and involves several intermediate stages before reaching the *final destination*. The escalation of violence in the study areas has altered mobility patterns, transitioning from internal and transborder migration to international migration: "The line between internal and international migrations is growing less distinct, influenced not only by geopolitical shifts and evolving border structures but also by the increasingly diverse, intricate, and fragmented nature of migrants' journeys" (King et al., 2008, as cited in Marcu, 2013, pp. 36-37).

In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge that while the majority of movements have historically been transborder, they have increasingly diversified in recent years, particularly evident in the case of Venezuelans traversing the continent in pursuit of reaching the United States.[4] Consequently, this article delves into the realm of international migration, while still

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[3] María Teresa Uribe (2000) uses the concept of "states of war" to explain that, in the Colombian case, it is not merely a matter of permanent war but the maintenance of hostility as a potential solution for resolving the tensions and conflicts inherent in social life. In this sense, violence has been used as a strategy to address the contradictions of communal life in the private, market, and public spheres, including politics and government.

[4] Following the economic crisis of 2008, several changes were observed, including an escalation in more stringent border control measures and shifts in migrant flows towards traditional destinations. In the case

recognizing the transborder processes preceding international departure. Since 2010, there has been a reconfiguration of departure and arrival contexts for Latin American flows, accompanied by various forms of mobility with differing levels of voluntariness, resulting in mixed flows: those departing abruptly without a clear destination, those initially with a destination but opting to settle in transit, and those determined to reach their originally planned destination.

While violence, whether explicit or implicit, underlies the increasing population mobility observed in the two cases under study, it is essential to delineate the unique characteristics of its presence and the varying impact it has on different actors, state interventions, and societal responses. Similarly, given that violence has recently become a tool for controlling border flows, resulting in violations of the rights of mobile populations, it is imperative to assess the effects of such measures. The analysis sheds light on the persistent periods of violence that have detrimentally affected the living conditions of populations exposed to security and life-threatening situations, as well as the emergence "new" issues concerning transborder dynamics. This articulation of factors questions global explanations—whether of humanitarian or migratory crises[5]—unveils their particularities, and identifies significant modifications in the migratory landscape of these countries.

The research begins with a hypothetical framework suggesting that in contexts of prolonged violence, the state's responsibility for safeguarding citizens' rights and ensuring their exercise appears to diminish amidst the escalating influence of illegal armed actors. The vulnerabilities that facilitate the intrusion of actors challenging the state's efficacy due to their control or ongoing conflict, coupled with its inability to address the demands and expectations of diverse population segments, are pivotal factors driving the surge in population mobility and warrant thorough exploration.

Thus, in this article, firstly, the key aspects of the departure conditions of individuals who have traversed and settled in these border regions are examined, along with the impacts and perceptions of their migratory journey. Secondly, the ambivalence of migration policies and the disproportionate effects of implementing such measures on regions hosting transborder

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of Mexico, there was even discourse about "zero migration," indicating an almost negligible migratory balance resulting from the economic slowdown in the United States. A similar trend occurred in Spain, where there was a rise in the return of South American migrants to their countries of origin. Additionally, there was a surge in south-south migration—both transregional and transborder—leading to new destinations, including northern Mexico and countries like Peru, Chile, and Argentina in the southern region of the continent.

[5] The Venezuelan situation of the last five years has been widely regarded as a humanitarian crisis, particularly by multilateral organizations, human rights bodies, and the media; from this, the so-called migrant crisis, exodus, or diaspora has emerged, leading to a diversification of destinations (Serbin Pont, 2018; Vargas Ribas, 2018). Some authors question whether what is unfolding in Venezuela should be labeled as a *migrant crisis* or rather *migration within crisis contexts* (Gandini et al., 2019). In this sense, it is acknowledged that the displacements of the Venezuelan population constitute a migration within crisis settings, because they are the product of an unstable economic, political and social situation.

populations with specific protection needs—such as psychological or legal assistance that may initiate a refugee application process—are addressed. Thirdly, the interaction between the migrating population and the local community is analyzed, shedding light on the dynamics of social "hosting" by local actors, care organizations, humanitarian assistance providers, and other social entities. Finally, the reflection concludes by projecting elements elucidating the trends from a comparative standpoint.

DEPARTURE AND TRANSIT CONTEXTS

Central American migration through Mexico was primarily aimed at transit to the United States until a decade ago. However, since the administration of Barack Obama, not only has the journey become more precarious, but asylum conditions have also deteriorated, exacerbated further under Trump. The criminalization of irregular migration was emblematic of Donald Trump's government, which, in April 2018, threatened to deploy the National Guard to the border with Mexico to halt the migrant *via crucis* caravan—the first organized initiative to prevent abuses and rights violations during their passage through Mexico—.[6] Faced with this pressure, Andrés Manuel López Obrador signed an agreement with Washington to deploy the National Guard in border areas and receive asylum seekers in the United States while awaiting resolution. Consequently, Mexico evolved from being solely a transit country to becoming a destination country, under the premise of enhancing border security.[7]

In the Central American region, economic instability and social deterioration resulting from escalating violence were driving migration as a means of protection: "Honduras is really terrible [...] I was left alone, they killed my son's father and I decided to come [...] not to the United States, but to Tijuana" (interview 10, personal communication, January 4, 2019). The pervasive violence in the most marginalized communities of the primary Central American sending countries (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) creates invisible borders, delineating state presence while expanding the authority of gangs, compelling the population to flee (Médicos Sin Fronteras [MSF], 2020): "I said, 'well, I can't eat money, [I have to] invest it in something, because I'm going to continue being threatened by the same criminals' [...] because I reported it [...] the authorities did nothing" (interview 19, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

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[6] The first caravans originated from the efforts of mothers of migrants who had disappeared while traversing Mexico. Initially launched in Honduras and later in El Salvador, these caravans were organized to advocate for "free" passage through Mexican territory in order to search for their missing children. The Mexican government not only facilitated their transit but also their stay within the country. However, subsequent caravans did not receive the same reception; they were denied transit and residency, with border control heightened through militarization, including aerial monitoring (Fernández de la Reguera Ahedo et al., 2019).

[7] While the discourse categorizes them as transit migrants, these individuals are actually awaiting refugee status determination. Due to the circumstances of their entry into Mexico, they lack the resources to establish themselves. By adhering to this transit classification, the Mexican government avoids responsibility for providing adequate settlement conditions for these individuals, occasionally offering only limited humanitarian assistance while they await resolution.

By observing the entrenched violence within the communities of origin of a significant portion of those in irregular mobility, it becomes apparent that the marginalization and stigmatization they endure are direct outcomes of abandonment by both origin and transit states. Therefore, in comprehending the migration phenomenon, the emergence of situations that violate and harm individuals in transit cannot be disconnected from the implicit indication that underscores governmental incapacity to address the root causes of irregular mobility.

Mexico, serving as a country of origin, destination, transit, and return, has emerged as a significant context in addressing the vulnerability of individuals in situations of irregular mobility. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while Mexican migrants had historically constituted the largest detained population attempting to cross the border between the United States and Mexico, since 2018, detentions of migrants from the northern region of Central America have been on the rise[8] (Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes, [REDODEM], 2019).

In 2019, a total of 53 507 migrants were registered; the majority came from Honduras (25 442), Guatemala (16 999), and El Salvador (6 976). Compared to 2018, there was a significant 67% increase, rising from 31 219 to 52 180, with the Central American region having the largest presence, with 30 768 migrants in 2018 compared to 50 161 in 2019, representing a 63% increase. It is worth mentioning that the presence of unaccompanied minors (UM) has decreased, comprising only 24.7% of the total number of children and adolescents in mobility in 2019 (UPMRIP, 2020). This trend aligns with the findings of fieldwork conducted in 2019 at the Mexico-Guatemala and Mexico-United States borders, where the majority of interviewees hailed from Honduras, followed by El Salvador and Guatemala, with the United States being their preferred destination.

In general, the specific characteristics of the migrant population allow to comprehend the reasons behind their mobility, drawing from the qualitative elements embedded in demographic data (economic situation and violence), thus elucidating the identification of migrant groups with distinct traits. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize that the analysis of this information does not isolate one factor from another; rather, their interconnectedness is acknowledged. In other words, both economic instability and violence serve as explanatory factors for leaving places of origin, shaping new migratory dynamics alongside the associated difficulties and risks: "I don't know why they fight so much, they shoot at each other all the time [...] there was no more school, we can't go out anymore, not even to the street or to work or anything" (interview 1, personal communication, September 23, 2018).

In the current migratory context, Mexico presents a complex scenario. As a country of origin, it continues to propel many individuals to seek a better standard of living and security in the United

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[8] The Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas (UPMRIP) (Unit of Migration Policy, Registration, and Identity of Persons) estimates that the number of Central American migrants has been on the rise since 2011, reaching a historic high of 394 200 in 2014. Additionally, it underscores that the average annual flow during the period 2014-2017 stood at 335 000 (UPMRIP, 2019).

States, thus being part of the expelling countries that fail to provide fair and dignified living conditions to a significant portion of its population.[9] Mexico has implemented migration control mechanisms that impact the entire population moving through its territory. With the massive mobility of migrants since 2018, Mexico has become a destination country; however, this has not resulted in policies aimed at improving the settlement conditions of Central American migrants. This complexity arises because forced migration also transitions into involuntary settlement driven by persecution and migration control.

In most cases, the United States remains the desired destination, but the numerous obstacles to reaching it often leave many migrants stranded halfway, with no possibility of returning to their place of origin or settling in Mexico. They are not assured safe passage, let alone regularization or employment opportunities if they stay. Fleeing from a violent context, they traverse an insecure space frequently controlled by illegal actors, who "leave you naked, without shoes, without money [...], you have nothing, and that's when our ordeal begins" (interview 8, personal communication, March 1, 2019).

One of the most significant observations made by those who accompany migrant populations in their transit through Mexican territory is that current migration policies are ineffective in protecting the youngest individuals, particularly because they are the ones leaving their countries to safeguard their lives and distance themselves from the risk of gang recruitment. Upon arrival in Mexico, they become vulnerable to state security forces that do not guarantee their physical integrity.[10] This situation has been worsened by the presence of the National Guard in border security tasks; previously, local, regional, or federal security forces only provided support to agents of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (National Institute of Migration). The violation of rights is "the same for everyone in Mexico, the police, organized crime, migration, federal police, everyone violates human rights" (interview 5, personal communication, January 22, 2019).

In general, during the first third of the year 2019, it was documented that individuals in transit through Mexican territory were constantly victims of robbery, extortion, abuse of authority, kidnapping, sexual abuse, torture, human trafficking, among other aggressions. In the majority of cases, the perpetrators were authorities at all levels of government, including members of private

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[9] According to statistics from the UPMRIP (2021), over the past three years, there has been a decline in repatriation events of Mexicans from the United States. However, the regions of origin of the repatriated individuals have remained unchanged: Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, states where criminal activity has increased. Coupled with high poverty rates, this compels the population to leave their places of origin. Consequently, large segments of the Mexican population are observed along the northern border, awaiting responses to their asylum requests in the United States.

[10] The figures reported by the Migration Policy Unit confirm these assertions. In the triennium 2016-2019, 40% of the total migrants reported being victims of crimes. More than two-thirds of the reports were made by males, mostly (80%) from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The most recurring crime was robbery, followed by human trafficking and kidnapping. According to the Migration Policy Unit (UPMRIP, 2021), 81% of the victims were adults (25-35 years old) and the rest were minors. The events reported in the border area of Chiapas constitute 44%.

security companies and organized crime (REDODEM, 2020). These violations are not only systematic but also many of them resemble the situations that prompted migrants to leave their places of origin. When discussing the phenomenon of migration and its structural causes, one of the points attempted to be emphasized is that citizenship or nationality registration does not guarantee the full enjoyment of rights considered universal.

The case of Colombia-Venezuela underscores a similar situation regarding the impacts on the mobile population, particularly with the rise in transborder and extracontinental migration (Organización de los Estados Americanos [OEA], 2017), which has positioned Colombia as a transit hub due to its geographical location as a border country, sharing land borders with Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Brazil. Historically, Colombia has been a country that experiences population outflows, reaching levels of internal displacement and international migration that indicate approximately 20% of its population is in a state of mobility (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2015, 2018).

Among the causes of the increasing population mobility, particularly towards the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, the impact of armed conflict and the escalation of violence due to the presence of various illegal armed actors vying for territorial control, drug trafficking routes, and extractive wealth sources have been emphasized (CNMH, 2015, 2018). The armed conflict entails dynamics of territorial expansion and border control, turning them into permanent spaces of confrontation, and also revealing the limits of the state's capacity to control these territories due to the loss of the monopoly of legitimate violence (González et al., 2003).

The strategic significance of these territories in relation to the development of megaprojects, particularly along the border with Venezuela, has revealed that, in addition to actions related to the armed conflict, economic interests from various actors—such as ranchers, landowners, drug traffickers, national and transnational capitalists—also emerge. These interests contribute to a more complex dynamic of the migration phenomenon, as they introduce additional causal factors that trigger and exacerbate it. Similarly, the recent situation introduces a new issue regarding the Colombia-Venezuela cross-border dynamics due to the increasing and massive migration of Venezuelans.[11]

In this evolving context, a notable shift is emerging in Colombia's migration pattern. Historically known as a country of emigration, Colombia had seen Venezuela become a preferred destination. However, this pattern is now starting to reverse due to the Venezuelan crisis, resulting in a massive movement of its population towards various destinations, with Colombia being a central one. Consequently, population mobility has become more diversified, and the conditions

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[11] Despite the challenge of providing definitive figures on the Venezuelan migratory flow in Colombia due to the absence of registration mechanisms, its sustained growth over the past 5 years is undeniable. Out of the 7.72 million Venezuelans who have left their country, 2.88 million are in Colombia, approximately 37%; this makes the country that has hosted the most Venezuelan population (R4V Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela, 2023)

in these cross-border areas have become increasingly complex. Economic precariousness, violence, and insecurity now impact the entire population on the move.

The perception of the significance of these factors varies, as evidenced in testimonies and some studies. A Colombian migrant in Venezuela highlights that "Colombia has a repressive State policy, serving multinational corporations, of the United States," and in her family's experience, there have been "generations with a history of internal migration" who were then compelled to migrate to Venezuela to "safeguard their lives" (interview 38, personal communication, December 5, 2019). Concerning the conditions stemming from the increasing wave of Venezuelan migration and the shift in the trend of this migrant population, the analysis of information reveals diverse circumstances and moments.

Factors such as food scarcity, lack of hygiene products, medicines, and medical supplies, the collapse of the economic situation, as well as widespread violence and harsh operations by the National Guard (Serbin Pont, 2018; Vargas Ribas, 2018), have prompted a significant number of Venezuelans to leave the country unprepared, not knowing where to go, lacking money, and having no contacts. Some even embarked on their journey on foot and spent nights in parks. Some of the individuals interviewed mention the support they received at their destination or transit location —from relatives or local residents—manifested in temporary accommodation, financial assistance, information, and job referrals.

Starting from 2017, violence and political persecution emerged as additional drivers of migration. Instances of harassment by national armed forces and intelligence agencies were documented; individuals were blacklisted and unable to secure employment in their field for having voted against the government. Conflicts with police officers and violence instigated by organized crime were also reported (interview 31, personal communication, November 14, 2019; interview 35, personal communication, November 23, 2019). The collected testimonies also shed light on the role of the Venezuelan public force as a catalyst for migration: "The National Guard, which is the militarized police in the country, [is] the most hostile element that citizens face on a daily basis" (interview 29, personal communication, December 28, 2019). Likewise, there are accounts of harassment and persecution by the Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (SEBIN) (Bolivarian National Intelligence Service) for ideological reasons targeting members of opposition political parties (interview 53, personal communication, January 7, 2020).

In general, the increase in violence and insecurity, the rise in the use of psychoactive substances, and the resulting "breakdown of social fabric" (interview 29, personal communication, December 28, 2019) are emphasized as primary triggers for migration. Interviewees also highlight the "symbolic violence" perpetrated by the State, attributed to the "increase in bureaucracy and the State's failure to address citizens' requests, complaints, or claims, particularly regarding documentation processes" (interview 33, personal communication, November 15, 2019). Moreover, they mention instances of police violence instigated by the State, manifested through acts of abuse, arbitrary detentions, extortion, and threats (interview 31, personal communication,

November 14, 2019). In addition to these departure conditions, testimonies recount experiences of violence and insecurity during transit.

However, underlying and preceding this situation in border areas is a context of transformations. For years, binational relations oscillated between conflict and cooperation. Since 2010, the relationship was primarily regulated by Colombia with the government of Venezuela, albeit mainly concerning commercial matters and without addressing issues related to voluntary or forced migratory flows in the binational agenda (Naranjo Giraldo, 2015). Nevertheless, various incidents on the border with Venezuela have led to heightened tensions between the two governments for years, posing an imminent risk for Venezuelans attempting to cross the border through trails or improvised crossings.

During the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, violations of the rights of migrant populations intensified. The measures adopted ranged from hostility to protection, illustrating a paradox: the closure of border crossings, the expulsion and mass returns of Venezuelans due to alleged impacts on public safety and the risk of virus transmission (Carvajal, 2020), and the recognition of the rights of stateless children—children of Venezuelans born after 2015, for whom Colombian nationality was considered for granting—(Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2019). This situation has been exacerbated by the crisis affecting the peace process[12] in Colombia and its implications for human rights: the criminalization and assassination of social leaders, land claimants, and returnees; the re-victimization of internally displaced populations; increased control over population movements and registration; and the rise of migrant populations from Haiti, Venezuela, and Senegal in precarious conditions worsened by the absence of a policy responding to the dynamics of increasing immigration.

Since late 2017 and early 2018, the sustained growth of Venezuelan migration has taken on massive forms, particularly making visible the presence of migrants who walk—referred to as "the walkers"—and are exposed to insecurity both during the journey and in confinement centers and shelters due to mobility restrictions caused by the pandemic (Red Eclesial Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Migración, Desplazamiento, Refugio y Trata de Personas [Red Clamor], 2020). Red Clamor collected more than 200 testimonies from Venezuelan migrants between August and December 2019 in 17 countries where organizations supporting migrants of the Catholic Church are present. The testimonies allow to discern the reasons for leaving Venezuela: political problems, violence, and loss of social, economic, and cultural rights; the transit routes where they face xenophobia and rejection, but also the support they receive from citizens who offer them food, shelter, and basic medicine for emergencies (Red Clamor, 2020).

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[12] The Colombian government and the guerrilla group FARC-EP signed the Acuerdo Final de Paz (Final Peace Agreement) in 2016, which included measures for victim reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. However, these measures have been affected by an escalation of violence, government commitments not being fulfilled, and a lack of necessary resources for implementation, among other factors (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2020; Iniciativa Barómetro, Matriz de Acuerdos de Paz e Instituto Kroc de Estudios Internacionales de Paz, 2019).

In recent years, the social and economic conditions of the inhabitants on both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela border have underscored the intricate relationship between factors associated with socio-economic and political changes in both countries and the pre-existing precariousness, inequality, and poverty among diverse social sectors. The situation in the border area, shared by people of both nationalities, also accentuates the challenges faced by states (at various levels) and society in ensuring the attention to migrants, both in terms of social reception conditions—whether favorable or not to their settlement—and in relation to legal matters.

While not all those consulted point to violence as the sole triggering factor for migration, the testimonies reveal a combination of circumstances and a prevailing sense of insecurity before departure and in transit spaces. Overall, the testimonies consistently mention the loss of access to rights in health, education, housing, and food, as well as the impacts of changes in the socio-political situation of the country of origin and the prevailing conditions of insecurity, highlighting the responsibility of governments: "Venezuela was a very prosperous country [...] but under Maduro's government, there is practically no electricity, no transportation, [...] what people earn from their jobs doesn't even cover anything [...] everything turned into nothing:" (interview 51, personal communication, January 6, 2020).

Regarding security, they point out, for example, that "there is no social protection, there is no security whatsoever for the people. And they have a subdued population because there in Venezuela [...] if you don't agree, they shoot you for free" (interview 44, personal communication, January 4, 2020). Faced with the decision to migrate, some even indicate that this was forced by circumstances: "my son who was already grown, I was going to look for him because of so much killing of youths" (interview 48, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Similarly, the information gathered in the survey by the Interagency Group for Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM in its Spanish acronym) in 2020 indicates the high levels of vulnerability of the Venezuelan population in Colombia: 85% of families have difficulty accessing food, 68% lack housing, 44% do not have work or sources of income, 65% consume two meals a day or less, and one in three Venezuelans has had to ask for money on the street to buy food (R4V Response for Venezuelans Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, 2020).

The examination of the conditions leading to departure in the countries of origin in the two cases studied, as well as the circumstances experienced during the migratory journey, highlights the issue of human mobility within contexts marked by the presence of violence associated with various actors—both legal and illegal—and the escalating precarity of social and material conditions for the population. This situation perpetually exposes migrants to evident risks in border areas. Factors such as lack of access to food, housing, healthcare, labor exploitation, human trafficking, and xenophobia form a persistent chain of exclusion and extreme vulnerability. This raises doubts about the ability of states to ensure the well-being of both their resident population and those in motion.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN PROTECTING
MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Until the first decade of the present century, Mexico—like Colombia—had primarily been a country of migrant origin. Currently, it also includes migrants in transit toward the U.S. border. Unlike Colombia, Mexico's immigration policy was established in the second half of the 20th century, following World War II. Initially, the country focused on managing the flow of Mexican temporary workers to U.S. fields. By the mid-1970s, the concept of the transmigrant was incorporated into immigration law, likely due to regional sociopolitical circumstances that produced a number of people seeking refuge in Mexico. It was not until 2001 that Mexico shifted towards stricter border control, aligning with U.S. demands following the terrorist attacks of September of that year. Since then, several agreements have been signed between the two countries—such as the Iniciativa Mérida and the Plan Frontera Sur—to prevent the entry of potential terrorists into the region and to establish a control logic based on the suspicion that irregular migrants could be linked to terrorist groups.

> In general terms, in Mexico and Central America, the term has been used to describe the externalization of U.S. border control policy and the experiences of disappearance, kidnapping, and death of migrants on their journey north. In South America, with some exceptions, the term is associated with changes in national immigration policies, especially following the so-called "rightward shift". Here, the term prevails to denote migration regulation schemes associated with "national security" and linked to processes and practices of criminalizing migration (Pereira & Domenech, 2021, p. 283).

The security-border control dichotomy has become entrenched in international migration policies, fundamentally responding to the logics of current global capitalism. This is compounded by the increase in asylum applications in the United States, whose process is very long and cumbersome, putting pressure on Mexico to become a safe third country, which the Mexican government did not agree to. Instead, it proposed the Quédate en México (Remain in Mexico) program—implemented at the end of 2018—which has had negative consequences for people seeking to reach the United States to request asylum or improve their living conditions (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados [ACNUR], 2021). Under the migration policy of the Trump administration, a strict restriction was imposed: those wanting to enter the U.S. would face the decision to stay in Mexican territory while waiting for a response to their asylum application.

As demonstrated in Moncada's 2020 report *En la boca del lobo*, the Mexican government's consent was—and continues to be—granted under the guise of humanitarian aid, which in practice has resulted in repeated violations of migrants' rights. The report notes that despite initial resistance from the Mexican government to President Trump's request, the program began operating in northern Mexico in January 2019. The Trump administration, undeterred, threatened Mexico with tariffs, leading to a bilateral agreement that both halted the president's threats and contained the migratory flow to the U.S. On June 7, 2019, a "Joint Declaration" was made public, outlining the details of the agreement:

1) Security: which involves the deployment of the National Guard in Mexican territory, primarily at the southern border.
2) The expansion of the *Programa Quédate en México* to other points along the border.
3) The development of a regional strategy aimed at increasing investment in Mexico and Central America (Moncada, 2020, p. 25).

The agreement stipulated that Mexico would process residency permits for third-country nationals, with assurances from the Mexican government regarding access to work, healthcare, and education for migrant individuals. However, these assurances failed to materialize; instead, this update to the migration policy represented a blatant violation of the rights of individuals in transit. In many instances, civil society organizations and international bodies like UNHCR[13] step in to aid this population and document their heightened vulnerability, particularly those awaiting asylum in high-crime border regions such as Tamaulipas. From January 2019 to March 2020, the U.S. government sent over 66 000 individuals back to Mexican territory to await the adjudication of their asylum claims. By the end of 2020, the majority of these applicants had yet to receive a response, leaving them compelled to endure precarious conditions without security assurances from the Mexican government (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2021).

In practice, the humanitarian rhetoric[14] of the Mexican government translated into militarization and police enforcement of border control, aligning with Trump's directives. The López Obrador administration has approached migration as a matter of national security, evident in the deployment of over 6 000 military personnel in 2019. The trend towards securitizing migration (Pereira & Domenech, 2021) is manifest in various ways, including the authority granted to the National Guard by the migration policy to apprehend migrants within Mexican territory. It is important to highlight that many of these personnel are active-duty soldiers or military police temporarily assigned to support border control, lacking adequate training to engage with vulnerable populations (Meyer & Isacson, 2019). Moreover, it is essential to recall that

> the actions taken by the National Guard regarding migration are illegal since [...] they also contravene articles 2, 66, and 67 of the Ley de Migración [Migration Law] [...] irregular migration status will not, under any circumstances, constitute a crime (Moncada, 2020, pp. 31-32).

However, it is evident that not only the National Guard but also federal and local police have been instrumental in enforcement efforts.

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[13] The UNHCR launched the Conecta program, where people waiting in Mexico for the resolution of their asylum applications could register on its website, all aimed at ending the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). This program, also supported by IOM and UNICEF, provides information and guidance services, legal advice, reception in shelters, identification of individuals, as well as support in job placement and local integration of migrants (ACNUR, 2021).

[14] Within the realm of critical migration and border studies, humanitarianism or the humanitarian concept has been scrutinized as a specific means of legitimizing migratory and border control (Fassin, 2016; Basualdo, 2021).

The expansion of military capabilities does not align with the protection needs expressed by the migrant population. On the contrary, individuals returned to national territory have recounted the vulnerability imposed by the Quédate en México program: people have been left out in the open, exposed to the elements, and devoid of access to shelters with dignified conditions (HRW, 2021; Meyer & Isacson, 2019; Moncada, 2020; MSF, 2020). Upon reaching any northern border area, their lives and well-being hang in the balance, vulnerable to illegal trafficking and the pervasive violence inflicted by organized crime.

The securitization of borders has been exacerbated by measures enacted in response to the COVID-19 health emergency, creating two factors that escalate the plight of those attempting to enter Mexico or those in transit. While Mexican governments have struggled to ensure the peace and security of their citizens, for migrants, it represents an exceedingly perilous territory. In addition to documented instances of aggression during detention processes, migrants face a myriad of high-risk situations including deprivation of liberty, forced recruitment, disappearance, homicide, and sexual violence, although the precise extent of the affected population remains uncertain. These forms of violence are not isolated incidents and often intersect (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos [CNDH], 2018; Díaz Lize, 2020; Gómez Johnson & Robles Rodríguez, 2021; Martínez-Castillo, 2020).

The discourse surrounding irregular and/or forced migration has contributed to portraying migrants as a potential threat, thereby fostering tolerance for the use of force—whether by police or criminal entities:

> One perspective interprets securitization as a speech act employed by political authorities to frame international migrations as an "existential threat" to collective or group identities (such as national identity), and thus produce an extraordinary political response that is embraced by the 'audience' (Pereira & Domenech, 2021, p. 287).

In a context where organized crime has taken over large portions of territory, the local population has incorporated certain behaviors into their daily lives. Consequently, it is not uncommon that when instances of violence occur, instead of evoking indignation, suspicion arises regarding potential involvement by those associated with criminal activities. This suspicion sometimes serves to rationalize the mistreatment, fatalities, or disappearances of migrants. As suggested by Domenech (2013, p. 121), perhaps what is preferable is to adopt an approach characterized by "humanity" by bridging the gap between international migration policies—often dictated by governments of the developed North—and the tension between human rights and security, as a counterweight to the escalating fortification of border controls.

This leads to a discussion on the concept of migratory governance (or management, as some term it), which aims to propose win-win solutions (Gandini et al., 2020; Domenech, 2013; Guizardi et al., 2021). However, border control persists—perhaps less restrictively—with the primary goal of preventing the entry of irregular migrants, and fails to address the pressing circumstances experienced by certain regions that compel people to flee, such as natural disasters, extreme poverty, and various forms of violence, among other factors.

Regarding the role of the state in the Colombian-Venezuelan context, it is important to remember that Colombia has historically been a country of emigration. Consequently, its migration policies have primarily focused on the needs of the Colombian population abroad. Only in recent years has this trend shifted, making Colombia a receiving country, particularly for Venezuelan migrants. This new reality presents a significant challenge in developing a comprehensive migration policy[15] that addresses the needs of returnees, Colombians abroad, and foreign migrants by regularizing their status. In contrast, Venezuela, despite its history as a major receiving country, has shown that its migration policies over the past 20 years have largely neglected the needs of its expatriate population, even as the number of Venezuelans moving abroad has steadily increased (Freitez, 2019).

Binational migratory flows between Colombia and Venezuela have been characterized by two primary trends: the historical emigration of Colombians for various reasons and the recent, substantial influx of Venezuelans, primarily into Colombia. The extensive 2 219 km land border between the two countries has facilitated a continuous relationship of neighborliness characterized by constant movement of people, despite occasional governmental tensions. Migration has occurred for economic reasons, due to forced displacement, because of Colombian-Venezuelan family ties, the return of Colombians, and the increasing mobility of Venezuelans in precarious or highly vulnerable conditions. These diverse migration patterns present significant challenges for regulatory frameworks aimed at addressing the needs of these populations and ensuring their rights are upheld.

Since the late 1990s, the binational agenda between Colombia and Venezuela has been dominated by security concerns, largely due to the impact of the Colombian armed conflict and Venezuela's stance on the matter. This situation cemented the perception of the border as a national security issue (Naranjo Giraldo, 2015). The U.S. government's concerns about the potential impact of the escalating Colombian armed conflict on hemispheric security, combined with the Colombian government's inability to defeat the insurgency and the consequent need for international aid, led to the formulation of Plan Colombia.[16] This initiative was expanded with the Iniciativa Regional Andina[17] (Andean Regional Initiative) in 2002, given the renewed strategic importance of the Andean region in the context of the global anti-terrorism campaign following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

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[15] On August 4, 2021, Law 2136 was enacted, establishing the definitions, principles, and guidelines for regulating and directing the Política Integral Migratoria del estado colombiano (PIM) (Comprehensive Migration Policy of the Colombian state) (Law 2136 of 2021).

[16] The U.S.-funded Plan Colombia prioritized a military approach from the outset, often at the expense of budgets intended for the political and social resolution of the Colombian conflict (Estrada, 2002; Vargas Velásquez, 2001).

[17] Since 2002, the strategy of Plan Colombia was expanded through the Andean Regional Initiative, incorporating Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, and Panama as part of the United States "global war on terror" strategy, which emphasized a new policy of regional and global control (Tello Vidal, 2005).

Since 2005, the Venezuelan government has intensified militarization in the border region in response to the escalating Colombian conflict. From 2010 onward, the change of government in Colombia facilitated diplomatic efforts, leading to the establishment of binational security commissions. However, these commissions often overlooked transborder human mobility, instead prioritizing issues such as illegal trade, smuggling, and drug trafficking, while disregarding the presence of migrants in need of protection. The measures implemented in both countries contributed to reinforcing a securitized perspective on migration: responsibilities related to migration issues, including information dissemination to migrants and refugees about protection mechanisms and ID issuance processes, were entrusted to the army and the National Guard, reflecting the growing militarization in border regions (Naranjo Giraldo, 2015).

The testimonies collected in this research corroborate the coerced nature of mobility and the precarious conditions and rights violations experienced by migrants, especially at border crossings. In Colombia, the lack of a comprehensive migration legal framework to guide actions for the care and protection of the large Venezuelan migrant population has resulted in the adoption of temporary measures prompted by the perception of population mobility as an "emergency" As a result, this exceptional and provisional treatment has exacerbated the irregular status of migrants, impeding their access to exercising their rights.

Therefore, initiatives such as Permisos Especiales de Permanencia (PEP) (Special Permits of Stay), Tarjetas de Movilidad Fronteriza (TMF) (Border Mobility Cards), and the declaration of a social emergency at the border by the Colombian government in 2017[18] aimed at facilitating a supposed temporary regularization of Venezuelan migrants in Colombian territory. However, these measures have been accompanied by police presence and intervention during migrant registration, with immigration authorities exercising a level of discretion that fosters distrust and fear among migrants in irregular situations. This fear stems from the risk of deportations and expulsions they face.

It is worth noting, furthermore, that Colombia has received approximately 950 million dollars from the United States, the European Union, the World Bank, and Japan (Romero Salamanca, 2020) to assist the Venezuelan migrant population. This raises questions about the role of the Colombian government, which may be leveraging the situation of Venezuelans to gain economic benefits while also politically exploiting Venezuela's response capacity. Regarding this, Ospina and Ramírez (2021) remark: "the increase in Venezuelan migration [...] not only affected the migratory landscape of the entire region but was used politically as one of the most visible faces of the failure of the so-called '21st-century socialism'" (p. 3). Consequently, migration policies in these countries in recent years must be analyzed within a context of tensions that impact not only domestic dynamics but also Latin American geopolitics.

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[18] Article 140 of Law 1873 of 2017 established the presence of a social emergency along the border with Venezuela, directing authorities to "design a comprehensive policy for humanitarian assistance and allocate resources in the fiscal year through the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management" (Law 1873 of 2017).

Amid Colombia's discourse of emergency humanitarian aid in provisional measures, there persists a trajectory towards the securitization of migration evident in the methods adopted for border control and closure. Consequently, migrants in transit have found themselves profoundly vulnerable, confined to border towns without access to food, shelter, or financial resources, and exposed to conditions of insecurity and violence. Women, in particular, have experienced elevated levels of sexual violence, while children have been subjected to exploitation through begging and/or abandonment during the journey from Venezuela to Colombia. Additionally, similar to the recent past when a significant number of Colombians sought international protection, in the current scenario, numerous Venezuelans are in transit with a pressing need for international protection. However, in both instances, the respective governments have obscured this issue and limited their responses to provisional measures and humanitarian considerations, particularly relying on the assistance of social organizations.

Thus, in the cases examined, a governmental trend towards the adoption of political measures aimed at containing and controlling migration is evident, aligning with the prevailing securitization agenda and often masked within the humanitarian discourse of ruling authorities. The trajectory towards securitization of migration in the region, observed since at least the 1990s through mechanisms like "border externalization" (De Genova et al., 2014, p. 4) designed to manage migration flows—initially from Central Americans and later from South Americans, Caribbeans, and even extra-continental migrants ([In]movilidad en las Américas. COVID-19, 2020)—has intensified over the past decade. This has resulted in increased irregular migration, a rise in unaddressed or suspended asylum requests, and heightened deportation rates.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR BORDER CROSSING

The outlined context of restrictions and population control highlights a scenario marked by violations of rights, further exacerbated by the proliferation of fear, insecurity, and violence in border areas, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and precariousness. Nevertheless, migrants persist in resistance and employ a range of actions and organizational structures that, beyond mere survival, underscore their agency and integration with the host society. These efforts manifest through diverse strategies and collective advocacy initiatives, particularly evident in border towns where migrants confront analogous conditions of vulnerability.

Amidst the backdrop of aggressions, oversights, and human rights violations against migrants, there has been a notable emergence of associations, civil society organizations, and people who, individually or collectively, have undertaken significant efforts as an urgent response to provide protection, offering essentials such as water, food, and medical attention. Additionally, they have played a crucial role in documenting and raising awareness about rights violations, as well as providing support in migration procedures.

Many advocates are members of the migrant community itself, actively engaged in documenting violations of their rights, establishing communication with authorities, and providing voluntary support at shelter sites. Alongside the vital assistance offered by shelters and

compassionate individuals providing essentials such as food, clothing, medication, and psychological support, there is also fundamental work: accompanying migrants throughout their journey, joining caravans to highlight the extent of violence and its impact on migrants' bodies, and participating in searches for those who have disappeared along the way. Legal assistance plays a significant role as well, empowering migrants to demand respect for their basic rights and supporting the integration of asylum application files to mitigate the risk of deportation and/or detention in migration stations.

It is worth noting that much of the documentation and research on violations of migrants' human rights is carried out collaboratively by the defenders themselves. This collaborative effort has led to increased social and political visibility for the defense of migrants, but it has also made defenders targets of persecution and harassment. Since 2019, there has been a constant detention of defenders, and actions such as accompanying migrants and intervening directly in situations of risk or violence have been criminalized, equated with offenses ranging from public disorder to human trafficking. Despite these challenges, defenders persist in their work. The migrant caravans in Mexico over the last three years (2018-2021) have focused on ensuring safe transit for mobile populations while upholding the unconditional respect for fundamental rights.

The data collected for this article reveals the presence and establishment of support networks, spanning familial and social spheres, prior to migration, during transit, and upon reaching temporary or permanent destinations. The provision of essential resources—food, shelter, healthcare, assistance with documentation procedures, employment, and settlement—is evident in both case studies, notably facilitated by the involvement of local NGOs, international aid, and various religious institutions, including non-Catholic ones: "An NGO two blocks away provides lunches and medicines to Venezuelan women and children [...] Los Pinos Church manages that, [Christian] from Cúcuta, [...]; there is an NGO at the entrance of San Antonio, belonging to the Catholic Church" (interview 52, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Similarly, migrants have employed measures of pressure, mobilization, and advocacy, organizing protests and establishing encampments to garner attention from local governments and society at large. These strategies entail deploying mechanisms to challenge control regimes, safeguard and assert their rights, and foster solidarity among migrants and settled members of civil society. In recent years, there has been a noticeable emergence of hospitality within civil society, facilitating horizontal relationships between newcomers and residents who share similar experiences of exclusion and denial of rights.

On the flip side, there are instances of discriminatory and xenophobic social responses, manifested through explicit tensions among migrants, strained coexistence in neighborhoods or reception centers, and even evictions from homes. Internal disputes and grievances have led to confrontations with law enforcement, fights, vandalism, and the discovery of edged weapons and illicit drugs within camps (Motoa, 2018). Stigmatization further exacerbates discrimination, particularly heightening the vulnerability of Venezuelan migrant women. A study conducted by

Oxfam between February and July 2019 in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador yielded the following conclusions:

> Nearly half of the surveyed population in the three countries believes that migrant women will inevitably turn to prostitution, perpetuating sexist roles that burden women and assign them sole responsibility for caregiving, thereby facilitating rights violations (Oxfam International, 2019, p. 4).

Undoubtedly, the substantial and widespread influx of Venezuelan migrants has led to the proliferation of prejudices, which at times fuel xenophobic actions and practices, viewing strangers as "dangerous" or "intrusive" Similarly, this sentiment extends to the growing number of Central Americans and their extended presence in border areas with Mexico. However, what is evident in both case studies is the persistence of daily life, where communities confront hostility and transform it into solidarity among those who inhabit and traverse border spaces.

CONCLUSION

The criteria used to define the two case studies were primarily guided by the documentation of their dynamics and development. To achieve this, an investigative approach was employed, involving fieldwork comprising semi-structured interviews and participant observation, as well as the examination of various journalistic, documentary, and bibliographic sources, followed by the systematization of gathered information. Secondly, a comparative perspective was adopted, allowing for the analysis, from a "common base" of the persistent presence of violence in national contexts and revealing both the differential and similar features often obscured behind the label of "crisis." Recognizing the comparable impacts of violence and its interaction with other social, economic, and political phenomena facilitated the identification of explanatory trends that can contribute to the broader discussion about changes in transborder migration in recent years.

Additionally, monitoring was conducted on the political measures adopted by governments to compare the approaches underlying state responses to the migration situation in the region. There is a visible trend towards the utilization of migration control mechanisms, often under the guise of human rights discourse to justify police and coercive measures. Another aspect of comparison has been the social response, encompassing the expressions and practices of both temporary (in transit) and permanent (destination) host communities. These responses have not only facilitated the resolution of socioeconomic precarity but have also accompanied migrants' contestatory actions and claims. It was observed that, in the case of Mexico, the social response is primarily driven by the role played by civil society organizations or the third sector. Moreover, within social responses, hostile, discriminatory, and xenophobic discourses and actions were identified.

In summary, the article undertakes a descriptive and exploratory examination centered on the characteristics of expulsion contexts and the observed transformations in transit environments. It lays out a framework for comparing three areas of analysis: Firstly, the context of expulsion and transit, characterized by violence and prone to significant impacts on human rights, lacking protection, and leading to the precarization of mobile populations. Secondly, the realm of state

intervention, comprising strategies, measures, and increasingly stringent migration policies, that regulate the mobility of migrants in transit and manage population flows. This transforms cross-border dynamics through the securitization/externalization of borders, achieved by adopting control measures and mechanisms aimed at deactivating or discouraging population mobility.

And lastly, the social response that emerges from the challenges posed by the sustained and unprecedented growth of population mobility, especially in cross-border areas. This response varies between the reception and exclusion of migrants, nurturing bonds of solidarity, collective action, and organizational processes among the mobile population as they interact with local actors. Civil society organizations serve as allies, facilitating their stay in transit locations.

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