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INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND THE POLITICIZATION OF MIGRATION: THE CASE OF THE COLOMBIA–VENEZUELA BORDER

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ABSTRACT

Institutional Discrimination and the Politicization of Migration: The Case of the Colombia–Venezuela Border

In this article, the author presents the migratory phenomenon at the Colombia–Venezuela border in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article is based on many sources, including presidential addresses, statements, decrees, and press releases. The author argues how humanitarian assistance has been based on political maneuvering by the governments of Colombia and Venezuela, which constitutes discriminatory practices against Venezuelan migrants. The paper finally points out how this situation has aggravated the migration crisis, characterized by serious violations of fundamental human rights of the Venezuelan migrant population.

KEYWORDS: Venezuelan migration, Colombia, Venezuela, migration policies, COVID-19

IZVLEČEK

Institucionalna diskriminacija in politizacija migracij: primer kolumbijsko-venezuelske meje

Avtor v prispevku predstavlja pojav migracij na kolumbijsko-venezuelski meji v kontekstu pandemije Covid-19. Članek temelji na številnih virih, med katerimi so predsedniški nagovori, izjave, odloki in sporočila za javnost. Avtor trdi, da je humanitarna pomoč temeljila na kriterijih političnega manevra, ki je predstavljal diskriminatorno prakso do venezuelskih migrantov s strani vlad Kolumbije in Venezuele. Članek na koncu izpostavlja, da se je zaradi takih razmer zaostрила migracijska kriza, za katero so značilne hude kršitve temeljnih socialnih pravic venezuelskega migrantskega prebivalstva.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: migracije v Venezueli, Kolumbija, Venezuela, migracijska politika, Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

The Venezuelan migration crisis may be considered one of the world's largest migration crises. According to the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), "The exodus of Venezuelan nationals is already the largest in the modern history of Latin America and the Caribbean and involves both refugees and migrants from Venezuela" (R4V, 2018). This migratory phenomenon is complex and specific. On the one hand, are the migrants who remained in Colombia under deteriorating social conditions. On the other hand, are those migrants who want to return to their country from or through Colombia. For Venezuelan migrants returning to their country from Ecuador, Peru, and Chile, passing through Colombia is an obligatory step on their journey.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation of Venezuelan migrants; both the Colombian and Venezuelan governments have used the pandemic for political maneuvering. In the case of Colombia, the country that hosts the largest number of Venezuelan migrants, we have found some particularities. The quarantine was ordered on March 22, 2020; Colombian president Iván Duque Márquez announced the news via his own television program, broadcast daily on all Colombian television channels. The opposition political parties requested the suspension of the television program; social protests in Colombia and the resulting police brutality against the protesters led to its suspension in May 2020.

As per government policies, the television program was characterized by the strong presence of the business sector and its appeals to Colombian nationalist sentiment. In contrast, there has been a lack of participation in the public discourse of the most vulnerable populations, such as the homeless, the indigenous, Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and Venezuelan migrants. In this respect, we monitored the daily presidential discourse and statements. We must consider the social and political agenda and the daily political responses in this context. Pajnik states that "only by placing the power and politicality of migration at the center of the analysis are we able to see the true nature of bordering" (Pajnik, 2019: 128).

COVID-19 has exposed the reality of social conditions in several regions, where social problems remain unresolved by governments and the international community. Della Puppa & Perocco (2021: 8) argued, "If the novel coronavirus is a symptom of the current state of the environment and a sign of the progressive disease affecting the biosphere, the coronavirus crisis is a litmus test and a mirror exposing the structural problems of contemporary societies, highlighting the major crisis of our times".

The dramatic social conditions represent a real social challenge for the governments and institutions of these two countries. However, there is a lack of political will to resolve serious socioeconomic problems: "Both in its role as a litmus test and social accelerator, the coronavirus crisis has converged and entangled pre-existing social contradictions, exacerbating social hardships and inequalities, increasing social risks" (Della Puppa & Perocco, 2021: 9).

The borderland between Colombia and Venezuela is considered one of the world's most dangerous borders. Since 1830, these two neighboring countries have shared one of the most dynamic borders in South America; running for 2219 km, it is a zone of deep politicization and government propaganda. The media focuses on the diplomatic and commercial crises around the borderlands to make them visible to the public (Jiménez Aguilar, 2008). Despite this complex and dramatic situation, the two governments have not responded to resolve this situation and attend to the migrant population. We conclude how, paradoxically, the two most antagonistic governments in the region share the same exclusionary policy, aggravating the marginal social conditions of migrants that existed before the coronavirus pandemic.

COLOMBIA, A SETTING OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Colombia is a country characterized by profound exclusion and marginalization of large parts of its population. It is a structural phenomenon embodied by government corruption and a deeply entrenched political elite. As we identified in the presidential television program, many populations were not considered, particularly those most in need of protection. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) report entitled "Social Panorama of Latin America 2019" showed that Colombia is one of the countries with the most inequality in the world. This report indicated several aspects that help us understand the social situation, including income inequality measured by the Gini index. "However, these averages mask very uneven patterns from one country to another, in relation both to inequality and to the intensity and direction of the changes in these different periods. Argentina, El Salvador and Uruguay recorded the lowest levels, below 0.400, while Brazil and Colombia recorded levels higher than 0.520" (ECLAC, 2019: 21).

According to the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), in 2019, the percentage of the Colombian population classified as living in extreme poverty was 9.6%, and the percentage classified as poor was 35.7% (DANE, 2020). The previous indicators are made based on some imprecise criteria. For instance, the DANE report indicates that if a household is composed of four people, it will be classified as poor if its total income is below COP 1,310,696 (equivalent to EUR 340) (DANE, 2020). The logic of this measurement demonstrates an incorrect approach toward the phenomenon of poverty by Colombian institutions. The pandemic crisis has worsened the social outlook; the DANE institution reported a monetary poverty rate of 42.5% in 2020 (DANE, 2021).

Among the many examples of institutionalized discrimination, we can refer to homelessness at the height of the pandemic. Here, we see the relationship between exclusion and COVID-19. The press release shown in Figure 1 makes this apparent. This online press release narrates the actions that accompany a video presentation. The video begins with a police officer knocking on the lid of the sewer. This action



Figure 1: Source: Pulzo, 2020 (April 3).

gives the impression that the officer is absolutely sure that he will find someone in there. In response to the knock, the hand of a homeless person appears, who proceeds to tell the officer that he is in quarantine. The man, visibly shaken by the police visitor, is eating butter with his hands and appears in a deplorable state. The scene seems quite funny to the police officer, who laughs and says, “Stay home”, and, amid a national health crisis, seems to mock the situation. The police officer says to the man, “Well, well. Comply with the quarantine,” and, using his feet, puts the wooden door back on to cover the sewer. He also adds, “Close the door there; don’t go out” (own translation of the press release; Pulzo, 2020). This vignette illustrates a concrete example of an exclusive state’s high degree of marginalization.

In Colombia’s political, legal, and economic context, the level of vulnerability is higher for Venezuelan migrants. Most of them operate in the informal economy, one of the sectors most impacted by the pandemic through deteriorating economic conditions. This situation illustrates the substantial nexus between COVID-19 and the marginalized and impoverished Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. According to a recent Refugees International and Center for Global Development report, “the economic situation is especially challenging in areas along the border, where there are high concentrations of Venezuelans. Before the pandemic, many already experienced high rates of unemployment and informality, reaching up to 15 and 71 percent, respectively” (Graham et al., 2020). In an interview, Jozef Merkkx, representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Colombia, stated that 60% of Venezuelan migrants do not have an income (Sánchez, 2020). Only 29,095 Venezuelans have a work contract and are registered on the platform of the Single Registry of Foreign Workers in Colombia, set up by the Ministry of Labor

of Colombia; only 85,797 Venezuelans are registered in the social security contributions system (UNHCR, 2021).

According to a Venezuela Migration Project Observatory report, 51.7% of the Venezuelan migrants surveyed are in a situation of multidimensional poverty, which contrasts with 17.6% of Colombians; 48.8% of Venezuelan migrants face critical overcrowding in their homes (Palomares, 2021). We have witnessed Venezuelan migrants begging for food and shouting practically every day. It is important to highlight how the local population reacts to this situation. On one occasion, a person yelled, “Let us sleep.” On another occasion, even when a man was accompanied by his son, another person yelled, “If there are children, don’t, shameless.”

The Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM) report conducted in Colombia in June 2020 revealed: “[...] 74% of those surveyed stated that they had missed at least one meal a day out of the three required, which is associated with the difficult income situation of the households, and affects their ability to comply with the preventative isolation measures” (GIFMM Colombia, 2020: 28).

There is a broad assumption in the Latin American region that Colombia is a democracy that respects human rights, and Venezuela is a narco-dictatorship with gross and systematic violations of human rights. This political reasoning is present in most mass media. However, it contrasts with the social reality on the ground reported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which shows how most Venezuelan migrants live in conditions of extreme poverty and marginalization in the Colombian territory.

SOCIAL REALITIES AT THE INTERNATIONAL BORDER

The relationship between both countries has been very complex. Historically, there was a state called “la Gran Colombia” (Greater Colombia), which included modern-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama; this state dissolved in 1831. The border problems began immediately after the disintegration of Greater Colombia. Between 1833 and 1941, the presidents of the newly-formed states signed treaties of friendship, commercial alliances, limitations, and navigation (Cadena Montenegro, 2007). The region has experienced moments of tension, as Pastrana Buelvas stated: “The military acquisitions have experienced a particularly remarkable increase in Latin America in the last decade, inevitably bringing along rumors concerning ‘arms races’ that evoke old borderline disputes, old remnants inherited from the Cold War’s [...]” (Pastrana Buelvas, 2010: 57). Today, the Colombia–Venezuela border is one of the most complex regions in Latin America because of violence and narcotraffic, featuring severe human rights violations. Perocco highlights the worsening conditions of migrants arising from the impact of the pandemic in some geographical areas:

[...] The reports and documentation regarding migration in different parts of the world—for example, the Colombian–Venezuelan area, Central America, the Mexico–US border, India, the Balkan route, the sub-Saharan route, the Mediterranean route—have painted a gloomy picture; a large part of the migrations have slipped into a foggy limbo, passing even more into the hands of traffickers and criminal organizations that have often operated undisturbed (Perocco, 2021: 24).

The border of North Santander (Colombia) and Táchira State (Venezuela) is one of the most complex zones for both countries. The Simón Bolívar International Bridge is the most iconic place along the border and the main gateway between Colombia and Venezuela. We find several key features in this border area: first, the politicization of two governments; second, the Colombian armed conflict (one of the regions in Colombia most affected by this conflict is the border department of North Santander); third, the existence of enormous criminal activity; fourth, several cases of corruption.

THE POLITICIZATION OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN BOTH GOVERNMENTS IN THE BORDER AREA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both governments committed to criticizing one other, with allegations made from both sides. The historical problems, the institutional vacuum, and the global pandemic make this delimited region a complex social phenomenon. Instead of being a space for cooperation between both countries, the border area is a site of tension with constant political confrontation and the aggravation of human rights violations.

In the context of Caracas–Bogotá confrontations, both governments have used the current pandemic as a pretext to intensify political propaganda via serious allegations. For instance, a press release of the Ministry of People’s Power for Foreign Affairs of Venezuela denounced the Venezuelan government to the United Nations (UN) and Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) for “the inaction of Colombian migration authorities on the border with Venezuela in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, a situation that promotes Venezuelans’ entry through informal border crossing points” (Torres, 2020). The same press release also indicated: “The inaction of the Colombian authorities hampers the epidemiological efforts made by the Bolivarian Government to receive those Venezuelans that are returning home as they flee from the xenophobia and social havoc resulting from the late measures taken by Colombia due to Covid-19” (Torres, 2020).

Subsequently, Iván Duque Márquez alerted the UN and International Organization for Migration (IOM) to pay attention to the new income restrictions imposed by the Venezuelan government on Venezuelans who want to return, indicating: “That

will be an issue that the IOM and the UNHCR must observe because we are facilitating that humanitarian process" (own translation; Agencia EFE, 2020). In an interview with *Reuters*, the Colombian president indicated: "In the case of Venezuela the information is non-existent [...] There's not good hospital capacity or good epidemiological capacity, for a long time they haven't had serious vaccination programs. I think Venezuela is a time bomb from the public health point of view" (Symmes Cobb & Acosta, 2020).

In this political framework, not only were the politicians denounced but also their migrant populations. The Venezuelan government blamed returning Venezuelan migrants for spreading COVID-19. A publication of the Human Rights Watch indicated:

On July 8, Maduro said people crossing through illegal passageways were "contaminating their communities" and "killing their families." Previously, he said the returnees were "irresponsible" and that their families and neighbors should report them. Other authorities have called returnees "fascists," "camouflaged coup-plotters," and "biological weapons" sent to Venezuela (Taraciuk Broner & Page, 2020).

Based on presidential statements and other official information, we can identify the strong presence of nationalist discourse in both countries. One government (Venezuela) offers COVID-19 testing apparatus, and the other (Colombia) rejects it; both are looking for political advantages. One government (Venezuela) urges working together to gain recognition of its president, and the other (Colombia) rejects this proposal to maintain the perception that the Venezuelan leader Maduro is a narco-dictator. One government (Colombia) accuses the other of human rights violations against their people, and the other (Venezuela) asserts that Venezuela is the only country in the world receiving reverse migration. At the same time, all through this confrontation, the population trapped in the borderland continues to be unable to leave Colombia and unable to return to Venezuela. This population includes those who used to live in Colombia and the migrants returning from other countries who need to walk through the Colombia–Venezuela borderland.

DETERIORATING PROTECTION FOR VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS

As a logical consequence of the primacy of seeking political gain over social welfare, human development has been seriously affected, and the human rights situation has continued to deteriorate. Although the situation has worsened for millions of people in both countries, Venezuelan migrants have been most affected. Many refer to their desperate intention to return to their country despite obstacles indicating the absence of governmental cooperation as a "true odyssey." Following the March 14, 2020, border closure, as of November 16, 2020, 119,885 Venezuelans have returned to their home country from or through Colombia (UNHCR, 2020).

The absence of judicial protection assumes an approach of political exclusion by the host country. Jorge Castañeda highlighted that the former Colombian president's focus on the politics of open borders has continued with the current president. His focus is perhaps surprising given that he is "a right-of-center technocrat, who, at first glance, would not be an obvious candidate for expressing such solidarity with poor Venezuelans—especially since many of his compatriots are less sympathetic to their plight" (Castañeda, 2020).

The coronavirus crisis has increased the stigmatization of migrants by some local governments and populations. We find one example in the municipality of Pamplona in North Santander, whose mayor expressed: "I understand what a refugee is, but at this moment, the health and life of the citizens of Pamplona prevail" (own translation; Abramovits, 2020). This statement echoed the earlier assertion of the former mayor of Pamplona: "The city is permeated by irregular migrants whom we are going to make available to Migración Colombia" (Abramovits, 2020). This viewpoint has come to dominate the political agenda toward immigrant populations, particularly in small towns.

Another negative social consequence of governmental stigmatization and politicization during the pandemic has been the closed border policy of Colombia–Venezuela. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) argued, "Although many Colombians support the border closure, noting other countries have done the same, [...]" (Chavés, 2020); this response has had serious consequences. According to the independent information provider ACAPS:

The Covid-19 crisis has resulted in the closure of the Colombian border since March 2020, which has led to the appearance of new irregular crossings, making migration control difficult and increasing protection risks for *caminantes*. The risks include forced labour and sexual exploitation, forced recruitment, theft, extortion, and human trafficking and smuggling (ACAPS, 2021).

The Colombian institutional discourse has focused on the COVID-19 vaccines for some time. In an interview with BLU Radio, President Duque announced that Venezuelans without formal migratory status would not get access to vaccines. "The priority will always be Colombian citizens" and "those who do not have Colombian nationality and whose migration situation has not been regularized, they will not be vaccinated" (own translations; Redacción Blu Radio, 2020). We must note how the same Venezuelan opposition remained silent about this decision and encouraged the Colombian president. Subsequently, President Maduro indicated that the vaccines would be distributed in Venezuela free of charge to the entire population living in the country, "be they Colombians, Portuguese, Italians, Venezuelans" (own translation; Venezolana de Televisión, 2020). This last situation is an example of the high level of politicization and discrimination. In the case of the Colombian state, the populist declaration excluding COVID-19 vaccines is to the detriment of the human rights of Venezuelan migrants.

CONCLUSION

Venezuelan migrants represent one of the groups most affected by the coronavirus crisis. The majority endure human rights violations that continue to have a deleterious effect on their existing precarious conditions. Over recent decades, the Colombia–Venezuela borderland has seen episodes of political tension. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both Colombian and Venezuelan governments have focused their attention on this area as part of their binational relationship. In this paper, we have stressed the absence of a human rights approach, showing that political interests predominate over mutual solidarity. The two governments could not reach a minimum agreement to reduce hunger. We note how in the issued decrees and presidential statements, there has been a lack of any social assistance for migrants; and that this crisis has been exploited for political gain. The needs of Venezuelan migrants are usually not considered by either the host country or the country of origin. This institutional discrimination has further aggravated the suffering of migrants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that Venezuelan migrant patterns have changed significantly since living conditions have worsened. Thousands of migrants have been forced to return to their country of origin in a migratory journey characterized by extreme difficulties. We can observe that both in the wider society and in government policies in Colombia, the pandemic has laid bare the institutional discrimination against the migrant population. The absence of cooperation between both governments confirms our assertion of institutional exclusion and discriminatory practices in social care for Venezuelan migrants.

In Colombia, the coronavirus crisis has seriously affected all aspects of society, particularly the status of war and peace. In the case of the armed conflict and worsening social conditions for the population, “Illegal armed groups and criminal organizations have continued to take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their social and territorial control” (UN Security Council, 2020). The Colombia–Venezuela border is one of the most badly affected regions, where the violence continues to leave death and displacement. The peace agenda has been seriously affected, with significant delays in implementing the Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace. The assassination of social leaders has dramatically increased; in 2019, there were 132 assassinations, rising to 182 in 2020 (Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia, 2021).

The current pandemic interconnects with the dynamics of conflict. Criminality and insecurity are rife in the Colombia–Venezuela borderlands, making this particular mass migration flow a structural phenomenon and one of the most complex situations in the world. Some political parties and armed actors are taking advantage of the current pandemic to maintain criminal activities. To use an old proverb, they are “fishing in troubled waters.”

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POVZETEK

INSTITUCIONALNA DISKRIMINACIJA IN POLITIZACIJA MIGRACIJ: PRIMER KOLUMBIJSKO-VENEZUELSKE MEJE

Juan Pablo SERRANO FRATTALI

Avtor v članku opisuje pojav migracij na kolumbijsko-venezuelski meji v kontekstu pandemije Covid-19. Na eni strani so migranti, ki so ostali v Kolumbiji v vse slabših socialnih razmerah, na drugi strani pa tisti migranti, ki se želijo iz Kolumbije oziroma skozi to državo vrniti v svoje domače države. Avtor preučuje, kako je pandemija bolezni Covid-19 poslabšala položaj venezuelskih migrantov, saj sta tako kolumbijska kot venezuelska vlada pandemijo izkoristili za politične manevre.

Avtor ugotavlja, da so venezuelski migranti ena izmed skupin, ki jih je kriza s koronavirusom najbolj prizadela. Večina so kršene človekove pravice, zaradi česar se njihov že tako negotov položaj še dodatno poslabšuje. Avtor izpostavlja odsotnost pristopa, ki bi temeljil na človekovih pravicah, in pokaže, da politični interesi prevladujejo nad vzajemno solidarnostjo. Državi nista uspeli doseči niti minimalnega dogovora o zmanjšanju lakote. Kot ugotavlja, izdani odloki in izjave predsednikov ne vključujejo nikakršne socialne pomoči za migrante, kriza pa je bila zlorabljena v politične namene. Za potrebe venezuelskih migrantov običajno ni mar niti državi gostiteljici niti njihovi državi izvora, zaradi takšne institucionalne diskriminacije pa se trpljenje migrantov zgolj še povečuje.

