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**Migrations in Latin America and the
Mediterranean compared:
Violence, state cruelty and (un-)institutional
resistance**

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**The Venezuelan Migration in Context: integration and
migrant 'desirability'**

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COMPAS does not have a centre view and does not aim to present one. The views expressed in this document are only those of its independent author

Introduction

The current situation in Venezuela has been labelled a ‘Humanitarian Crisis’ by different UN organisations as well as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM October 2019), which estimates that seven million Venezuelans currently need humanitarian assistance - around 23% of the population. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to date 4.5 million Venezuelans have left the country (UNHCR, October 2019). They have migrated all over the world, but most live within Latin America – with Colombia having the largest share. I will argue that there have been two migration waves: one from 1999 to 2014 (starting from the rise to power of President Chavez in Venezuela), and one from 2014 to date (from the start of the intensification of the emigration flow).

This paper explains the context of the situation that has led to the migration of more than 10% of the Venezuelan population; it evaluates the migration patterns and analyses the issues surrounding the integration of Venezuelans into local societies in Latin America.

Context

For most Venezuelan migrants, the first country of entry is Colombia, and most cross one of the three major entry points connecting the Colombian Norte de Santander region with the Venezuelan Táchira region. The three bridges¹ over the Táchira River that separates the countries are the Simon Bolivar Bridge, the Francisco de Paula Santander Bridge, and the Tienditas Bridge. The first two bridges are significantly named after very noteworthy leaders of the Wars of Independence against Spain, and key players for Colombian and Venezuelan history: Simon Bolivar, *El Libertador*, Venezuelan leader and first president of Gran Colombia (1819-1830); and Francisco de Paula Santander, Colombian leader (born in the border region) and Vice-president of Gran Colombia (1821-1827). The third bridge, with a less significant name, was the location for the Venezuela Aid Live concert, sponsored by Richard Branson – where a number of Venezuelan and international artists performed and expressed their opposition to the current Venezuelan regime. These bridges have been closed at different times by both governments in the past few years, coinciding with both local events and following the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the two countries – including closures during the national strikes in Colombia, and following the Venezuela Aid Live concert. The bridges not only demonstrate the geographical, historical and cultural ties between the countries, but are also symbols of the politicisation of the migration flows.

¹ A fourth bridge connects the Colombian Arauca region with the Venezuelan Ápure region, named José Antonio Páez, after another leader of the War of Independence against Spain.

First Migration Wave

The Venezuelan economy has been highly dependent on oil revenues, especially since 1999 when Hugo Chavez came to power. His government implemented a number of socialist policies, including large programmes of social assistance, housing, health and education – the so-called Misiones – the funding of which was heavily reliant on oil revenues. Simultaneously were introduced a number of economic policies that discouraged private sectors of the economy from developing, and included price controls and expropriations.

Chavez's rise to power signalled the start of the first wave of emigration from Venezuela: it included many of his detractors, who disagreed with his policies and/or tried to protect their economic assets; as well as individuals who felt persecuted, such as civil servants who took part in anti-government strikes and were fired and blacklisted because of it. A 2015 report stated that 90% of the migrants up to 2014 had university degrees (Paez 2015), suggesting that the migration up to that point was composed of a very specific group of individuals.

The heavy reliance of the Venezuelan economy on oil revenues brought serious economic problems with the sharp fall of oil prices in 2008. Oil plummeted from \$164.22 per barrel in June 2008 to \$50.68 by January 2009 (OPEC 2019) – which led to a shrinking of the Venezuelan economy by 5.8% in 2009. Various economic measures were introduced to counter the downturn; however, these failed to stimulate the economy, and inflation reached over 30% (IMF). The final year of the first migration wave also saw a significant political change in 2013, as Chavez died and was replaced by Nicolas Maduro. Elections followed soon after and Maduro won with just over 1% of the vote, and with widespread allegations of fraud.

The Second Migration Wave

2014 was a significant year, as the price of oil suffered another slump, falling from \$112 per barrel in June to \$62 in December (OPEC 2019), having a deep impact on Venezuelan economy. The recession deepened and inflation grew, reaching over 60% - the highest in the Americas. 2014 also saw the first major anti-government protests, with over three months of demonstrations, and over 40 people dying (ICG 2016). This year also signalled the beginning of the second wave of migration.

From then on, the levels of inflation have kept rising. The IMF (2020) states that inflation in Venezuela reached 438% in 2017, and that it skyrocketed to 65,000% in 2018 and 200,000% in 2019. It estimates that the 2020 inflation rate will be around 500,000%.

The crisis is not only economic, but also social and political, and the security situation has heavily deteriorated. The Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (2019) states that homicide rates rose to around 90 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2015 and 2017 – the second highest in the world, after El Salvador. In addition, there has been an increased presence of the so-called *colectivos*, of Colombian irregular guerrilla and paramilitary groups in the border regions, a growth in illegal gold mining, and widespread allegations of drug trafficking.

There has also been a drastic shortage of food, medicines and medical equipment, many of which used to be imported and paid for with money from oil revenues. In fact, the Venezuelan Health Observatory² (2018) reports that 94% of the population cannot afford the Basic Food Basket and that 64% of Venezuelans lost around 11 kg of weight in 2016-17 due to lack of food.³ Similarly, Mazuera et. al. (2019) estimate that three million civil servants and five million pensioners live below the extreme poverty line – under two dollars a day. A large number of Venezuelan NGOs are currently focused on smuggling these items into Venezuela.

Politically, Maduro has kept losing popularity, both nationally and internationally. In December 2015, the opposition won two thirds of parliamentary seats in the National Assembly, but the Maduro government introduced several obstacles, which prevented it from functioning properly, including the creation of a rival Constituent Assembly in 2017 and the political persecution of many opposition politicians. Many of them are currently in Venezuelan jails or in exile, in foreign embassies in Venezuela or have fled abroad. There have been further protests almost every year since then, and hundreds of people have died protesting.

A tweet from Venezuelan journalist Luz Dary Depablos from March 2019 shows a number of makeshift bridges made out of stone crossing the Táchira River that marks the Colombian-Venezuelan border. When border is closed and people are not allowed to use the three bridges mentioned above, individuals create improvised platforms to cross the river and the border. The post states: “This was the scene this morning at a crossing through one of the main back-door paths of San Antonio del Táchira. You have to pay two thousand Colombian pesos to get access to the path and then a “donation” of another 500 hundred or one thousand pesos to cross one of the improvised bridges.” Two thousand Colombian pesos amount to only around 50 cents (USD), a seemingly small amount, but a significant one for Venezuelans.

Current Economic Situation in Venezuela

The rate of inflation has impacted Venezuelans’ earning power and has gravely devaluated its currency, the Venezuelan Bolivar. On top of the minimum wage, many Venezuelans are entitled to receive food stamps – the so-called ‘ticket socialista’ vouchers. As can be seen in Table I, these added up to 65,000 Bolivares up until September 2019. However, by July 2019 the Basic Food Basket was already costing more than one million six hundred thousand Bolivares (1,600,000 VES), making basic items prohibitive for many Venezuelans. The rampant inflation and currency devaluation also meant that this income plummeted from \$10.59 in May 2019 to only \$2.59 in September 2019.

² Observatorio Venezolano de la Salud (OVS).

³ Their previous estimate was a weight loss of 8.6kg (19 pounds) in 2015-16 suggesting that the food scarcity worsened.

May 2019		September 2019		October 2019	
Minimum Wage	40,000 VES	Minimum Wage	40,000 VES	Minimum Wage	150,000 VES
<i>Ticket Socialista</i>	25,000 VES	<i>Ticket Socialista</i>	25,000 VES	<i>Ticket Socialista</i>	150,000 VES
Total	65,000 VES	Total	65,000 VES	Total	300,000 VES
Equivalence in dollars	\$10.59	Equivalence in dollars	\$2.59	Equivalence in dollars	\$6.19

Table 1 – Monthly income in Venezuela

This means that in May 2019 the fee to join the path mentioned in the tweet above, without the donation, would account for 5% of monthly income. In September 2019, this fee would have accounted for over 20% of the monthly income⁴. The Venezuelan government decided to tackle this issue by raising the minimum wage and food stamps allowance, increasing the overall earnings to 300,000 VES or \$6.19. However, if the IMF inflation estimates for 2020 are correct (500,000%), any gains made by the rise will be erased. The February 2020 exchange rate means the 300,000 Bolivares are already only worth around \$4.

Migration Patterns

Data from the IOM and UNHCR for the different years of migration shows a difference in the destination countries of the Venezuelan migrants (see Table 1). The countries with the largest number of Venezuelan migrants in 2015 were the USA, Spain and Italy; in 2017, this changed to Colombia, the USA and Spain; and in 2019 to Colombia, Peru, and the USA. Non-Latin American countries feature prominently during the first wave of migration. The USA, Spain, Italy, and Portugal are all countries that can be considered difficult to migrate to, at least for Latin Americans. The data suggests that the first wave of migration had the economic and/or socio-political capital to migrate. This included wealthier individuals (as stated, most had university qualifications), and many had dual citizenship. Venezuela was a powerful magnet for migrants during its many years of economic prosperity, and sizeable numbers of Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese, Chileans and Colombians settled there. Many of their descendants, with dual nationalities, were also part of that first wave.

⁴ The Venezuelan government re-opened the border in June 2019

2015 (IOM) ⁵		2017 (IOM)		June 2019 (UNHCR) ⁶	
USA	255,520	Colombia	255,520	Colombia	1,3 million
Spain	165,895	USA	290,224	Peru	768,000
Italy	48,970	Spain	208,333	Chile	288,000
Colombia	48,714	Chile	119,051	Ecuador	263,000
Portugal	24,174	Argentina	57,127	Brazil	168,000
Mexico	15,959	Italy	49,831	Argentina	130,000
Total	687,567	Total	1,622,109	Others	1,1 million

Table 2

However, the data for the second wave shows a different scenario. The previous top destinations of wealthier countries start sliding down the table and most of the growth in migrant numbers is seen within Latin America. As can be seen from Table 2, there has been a massive increase in the number of migrants within Latin America. As of October 2019, the UNHCR estimates that 4.5 million Venezuelans had left the country, and that 3.8 million were living in Latin America. The total number is expected to reach 6.5 million by the end of 2020, which would be around 20% of the population.

The UNHCR figures estimate that there are 1.3 million Venezuelans in Colombia, however, it is very difficult to know the actual number and the figure is likely to be much higher. As was seen in the photo before, the borders are extremely porous and difficult to control. The figures also do not include Venezuelans who have dual Colombian-Venezuelan nationality, or the over 50,000 weekly 'pendular' migrants – who regularly cross the border to buy food, medicine and other supplies.

With the large numbers of migrants, a prevalent issue is what terms to use to define them. Some of the migrants are political refugees as they have been persecuted by the Venezuelan government and fall under the regulations of the Geneva Convention of 1951⁷. Accordingly, they have been granted political asylum. However, many have migrated because of economic reasons – not only to try to improve their living standards, but because of the dire socio-economic situation in Venezuela. Therefore, rather than simply labelling them

⁵ 2015 and 2017 numbers from the International Organisation for Migration

⁶ 2019 numbers only for Latin America, from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

⁷ The convention states in Article 1 (A2) that a refugee is one that: "...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it"

economic migrants, the idea of Survival Migrants (Betts 2013) is more suitable: migrants that are not technically refugees under international law, but are still fleeing fragile and failed states, where their wellbeing and survival are being threatened by the situation in which the country finds itself. In the case of Venezuela, the government is not directly persecuting all migrants, but they have all suffered from the declining economic situation, the hyperinflation, the food and medicine shortages, and the increased insecurity.

According to data from Mazuera et. al. (2019), in April 2019 more than 50% of migrants crossing the land border into Colombia were under 29, around 40% of all the migrants had a university degree, less than 20% had no qualifications, and more than 85% wanted one day to return to Venezuela. Their main destinations were Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile. Even though the second wave is much more pluralistic than the first one, many of those migrating are still professionals and/or young individuals, which can be an asset to the receiving country.

Desired and Undesired Foreigners

The idea of migrants being assets to the host countries is connected to ideas of 'desired' migrants, i.e. those that are considered to be beneficial to the country, as opposed to those that are not. My previous work on Middle Eastern migrants to Latin America discusses the idea of 'desired' and 'undesired' foreigners (Devis-Amaya 2014; 2019) and it is useful to include it here as it is helpful to understand the current situation. Alfaro-Velcamp (2013) argues that historically foreigners in Mexico were either 'desired' or 'undesired' based on the colour of their skin: white Europeans and North Americans were seen as desirable, welcomed into local societies, and allowed to access its elite social, economic and political circles. However, black and brown foreigners, mainly from Asia and Africa, were seen as 'undesirable', were discriminated against, and had serious difficulties entering local networks. She states that in order to avoid this discrimination, these migrants had to fully integrate into society and eventually forget their connections to their ancestral homelands. She argues, however, that Middle Eastern migrants were in a midway position: being neither white, nor black, they found themselves in the middle ground, where their economic success would define their status as 'desirable' or 'undesirable'. Successful Middle Easterners came to be seen as 'desirable' and were able to enjoy the benefits of other 'desired' foreigners. However, those not economically successful had to completely integrate to avoid becoming 'undesirable'.

This argument can be further extended to the rest of Latin America, as it not only applies to Mexico, but also to other countries in the region. Indeed, as previously demonstrated by Wade (2002) and Chua (2003), race and class are closely connected in Latin America, and the wealthier someone is, the whiter they are perceived to be within society.

These ideas are interesting to test within the current context of Venezuelan migrants to analyse their 'desirability'. From the outside, the migration is seen as very similar to the host communities as these

populations share a common history, religion and language, and have similar cultures and ethnic make-up. However, from within the countries, differences are sometimes highlighted by individuals or in the press.

The Venezuelan migration flow is not a 'white' migration that would automatically grant them 'desired' status, as it includes a mix of individuals from different backgrounds, different levels of education, and different socio-economic statuses. My hypothesis is that the categories of 'desired' and 'undesired' migrants still applies to the Venezuelans migrants and that their socio-economic status is playing, and will play, a very important part in this differentiation. In my initial interviews in Bogotá, Colombia, the Venezuelan participants already reported different experiences of discrimination: some stated that they have been subjected to racial slurs because of their nationality, often stressing the word 'veneco' with a profanity attached; others say they try to blend in as much as possible, hiding their accents in public places to avoid being targeted; whilst some others deny having ever received any sort of discrimination. It will be necessary to determine the connections between this discrimination, whether perceived or real, to the personal characteristics of the individuals.

In this case, it is the locals who are making the differentiation – showing that even though the migration has similar traits to the host society, there are still differences that allow for a classification of 'otherness' that may be quantified into 'desirability'. Venezuelan migrants have to learn how to navigate these differences, either by succeeding economically and becoming part of the 'desired' category, or by fully integrating into the local society to avoid becoming part of the opposite 'undesired' category. Different actors have a role to play in this transition to ensure discrimination does not lead to a wider perception of Venezuelans as 'undesirable'. This includes the national and local governments, the media, international organisations working in the country, the private sector, the migrant organisations, and the general public – both host and migrant. A number of serious cases of xenophobia have already been reported in the media, including increased discrimination and attacks to Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador (Pugh et al. 2020) and Brazil, and the tightening of immigration rules in various Latin American countries. My current research looks into these areas: the integration of Venezuelan migrants into local communities; the extent to which they are experiencing discrimination; the role of different actors both in terms of encouraging integration and combating discrimination; as well as security issues, both perceived and real, that accompany the migration flow. The migration of Venezuelans within Latin America is a topic that will be present for decades to come, and local actors must be prepared to handle it.

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