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Venezuelan migrations in Latin America in a context of humanitarian crisis: stakes and challenges in aid for migrants

As a result of her article on aid for refugees in Ecuador – which will be featured in the forthcoming issue of the review – Lucie Laplace, a Ph.D. student in political science at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 (France) and research associate at FLACSO-Ecuador (Quito), sought to develop her analysis of the fate of Venezuelan migrants in the country, and in Latin America more widely in Latin America.

Whilst the issue of forced migration in Europe is taking centre stage on the international media scene, little information exists concerning Venezuelan migration abroad. It must be said that these migrations are produced by a particularly complex local context, which partly explains why the “humanitarian crisis” in Venezuela receives so little media coverage.

At the political level, the debate has been raging over its qualification since the spring of 2016. The authorities of Nicolas Maduro’s regime have not followed the position of the National Assembly, dominated by the “Table of Democratic Unity”, a coalition of political parties united by the rejection of Chavism. The opposition is not homogenous: it includes people situated to the left of Nicolas Maduro’s party, but especially right-wing political personnel and economic elites. In 2016, according to the NGO *Human Rights Watch*, a majority of Venezuelans, mainly from the working and middle classes, were severely affected by difficulties in access to food, medicine and healthcare. Moreover, a number of cases of political persecution and violence have been recorded. The hunger riots of April 2017 cannot be interpreted simply from a partisan angle, since the mobilisation was far more widespread in society. The economic situation, namely due to inflation linked to the oil crisis, is a factor in unemployment and the increase in delinquency. From a humanitarian point of view, there are questions: have material conditions in Venezuela deteriorated to the point of affecting the human dignity of its population? For now, Nicolas Maduro’s government is not in favour of foreign intervention, even humanitarian aid, on its territory. Nevertheless, certain NGOs such as Caritas have announced that they are ready to intervene if necessary.

In any case, there is no doubt that the deterioration of living conditions has had significant effects on the composition of successive waves of Venezuelan migration. Since the 1960s, the country has been considered to be particularly attractive due to its economic dynamism, work opportunities, quality of life and good university levels. It received waves of immigrants from Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal) and Latin America (namely Colombia). Up until the beginning of the 1990s, the net migration remained positive. Over the course of that decade, there was a first wave of Venezuelan migrants towards the United States and Spain, with particularly privileged backgrounds (higher social classes, high level of education). In 1998, 300 000 Venezuelans were living in 20 countries. Over the course of

the migrations, the profile of migrants abroad gradually diversified, especially after Hugo Chavez's accession to power in 1999 as President of the Republic, when migrations abroad developed. Between 2000 and 2008, migration towards the USA and Europe continued, comprising highly educated young people belonging to the middle class. Starting in 2008, the latter widened their horizons by migrating (mostly by airplane) to different Latin American countries. Since 2012, and dramatically since 2014, the waves have been made up of people from increasingly working-class backgrounds. These migrants are seeking to flee their vulnerable environment to earn money and help their families remaining in the country. Their migration is towards neighbouring countries, by land or sea. It is a question of escaping the deteriorating living conditions, unemployment, inflation, and increased instability. The wave of Colombians who arrived in Venezuela in the 1970s and 1980s have progressively returned to Colombia, despite Chavez's accordance of dual nationality. In 2017, it is estimated that 2.5 million Venezuelans out of 31 million (or 8% of the population) are to be found in 98 countries. According to Ivan de la Vega, the director of the International Laboratory of Migration at Simon Bolivar University in Caracas, the number of Venezuelan emigrants has increased fifty-fold over the last two decades. Thus, in 2017¹, Colombia hosted around 300 000 Venezuelans. Ecuador estimates the Venezuelan population at 40 000 people, as do the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. Brazil hosts between 20 000 and 30 000 Venezuelans, the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba and Curacao 20 000 and 5 000 people respectively, Argentina 25 000, Panama 20 000, Peru 15 000 and Chili 10 000. It seems that Venezuelans are less and less well received in countries undergoing an economic crisis, such as Colombia and Ecuador, where discrimination against Venezuelan communities is on the rise.

Since the end of the 20th century to this day, Latin America has developed progressive norms of protection and coordination in favour of forced migrants (Cartagena Declaration on Refugees 1984, Brazil Declaration 2014). The HCR estimates that 80 000 Venezuelans sought asylum between 2014 and 2017 (42 000 in the United States, 14 400 in Brazil, 10 000 in Spain – the main European gateway – 4 700 in Peru, 3 300 in Costa Rica). In other countries like Ecuador, given the diplomatic relations with the Bolivarian Republic, it is uncommon for Venezuelans to be granted asylum. Depending on the country, they try to obtain authorisations for short stays (which generally allow them to stay for a maximum of 90 days in a territory in order to evaluate opportunities for work, or simply to cross the country as part of their migratory trajectory), special permits (Brazil, Panama), humanitarian visas, work and/or residence permits, including the Mercosur visa... The most vulnerable Venezuelan populations usually find themselves without status (especially in Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil).

In order to grasp the precise situation of these people in different Latin American countries and in the Caribbean, it would be necessary to carry out national and regional studies. However, in terms of the aforementioned instruments of migratory regulation (the Cartagena Declaration and the Brazil Declaration) which exist at the regional level in the context of cooperation policies regarding forced migration, it can be seen that these instruments are very seldom used. As a result, there is no regional policy to deal with these Venezuelan migrations. The waves of migrants over the last few years therefore tend to be considered as mixed flows, which is to say, flows provoked by different causes (economic issues, lack of

¹ These figures are approximations, some from the HCR, some from host governments. Most are the product of a compilation of journalistic information from unclear sources. The carrying out of a precise study at the regional level would be highly useful in order to evaluate these Venezuelan migrations more precisely.

state protection, social and political violence, etc), which do not allow for a clear understanding of whether the person is seeking asylum. Consequently, these flows do not command specific policies of coordination with a view to enabling international protection specific to migrants. The increase of mixed flows of populations is highlighted in the Brazil Declaration of 2014, which promotes the granting of economic visas for these people.

Faced with the weak international and regional management of the situation, the organisation of these migrations is done on a much smaller scale. The study of transnational networks has proven to be essential. Family migrations, in one or several waves, must also be taken into account, especially in the case of young people who “open the migratory pathways” for their relatives and the rest of their families (parents, siblings, friends). These strong social ties enable hosting, accommodation, and the generation of job opportunities and legal advice, thanks to the social capital which is developed on a local level by these pioneers, who play an advisory role with regards to existing opportunities. Migrant associations also advise people who migrate in a more isolated manner, offering spaces of reassurance. Human rights NGOs in the migrant sector accompany Venezuelan migrants in order to facilitate their local integration. However, these NGOs’ capacity to help remains limited in a context where their funding is reduced in terms of hosting, orientation and the promotion of human rights. Indeed, this issue does not appear to be a priority for governments and international cooperation agencies. These intermediary structures are nonetheless essential for the local integration of Venezuelan migrants, even though the vulnerability of these people cannot be managed by these actors alone. The development of networks of human trafficking and the increase in delinquency are real risks. It is important to evaluate and manage these risks in the host countries, but also more widely along migratory pathways in order to protect these people, because there is currently no reason to believe that migratory flows from Venezuela will dry up.

Since they cannot be reduced to mere economic migrations given the situation in Venezuela, Venezuelan migrations must be subject to more concerted management at the international level (international organisations, international cooperation agencies), the regional level (cooperation policies from the Brazil Declaration), and the national level (raising awareness amongst civil servants, host societies and migrants as to the rights of individuals). To do so, this management must include the opening up of spaces for dialogue and awareness-raising to support the protection of people and to prevent the rise of discrimination. This management is essential, especially in Colombia, in the current context of the negotiation and implementation of the peace process with different guerrilla groups. There is a risk of an increase in the factors of destabilisation in the construction of peace, by a slowing down of the economy, an increase in unemployment and workers’ insecurity, and a rise in delinquency and armed violence.

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