Understanding and Withstanding:
Comparing Colombian and Mexican Responses to Migration Crises

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Introduction

Latin Americans are on the move. Today, human migration in the region is more of a rule than an exception, such that by 2018, the Americas hosted 12.8 million “people of concern,” including asylum seekers and internally displaced people (IDPs). The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) calls this phenomenon “a displacement situation of complexity and magnitude not seen in decades.”[1] Though the population of concern encompasses a variety of nationalities, two displacement trends stand out: the exodus from the “Northern Triangle” Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; and the migration of Venezuelans.

The trend in Central America began in the 1980s and has only grown in the following decades. According to the UNHCR, “The stark choice for thousands of families and young women and men in Central America now is to leave or die.”[2] Extreme inequality, frequent natural disasters, insufficient job growth, and a large and unregulated informal sector have left 30-60% of residents in each country living below their national poverty lines.[3] Poor security conditions and low government capacity compound economic strife. Transnational gangs incite rampant violence, inflicting the region with some of the highest global homicide rates and Latin America’s highest femicide rates.[4] Marginalized identity groups, including indigenous and/or LGBTQ populations, are particularly susceptible to persecution. Governmental institutions in each country are weak, unwilling or unable to protect citizens, prosecute criminals, or address social and economic issues. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people from the Northern Triangle are “left no other choice… but to flee across an international border.”[5]

In contrast to the decades-long exodus from the Northern Triangle, the movement of Venezuelans is notable for its rapid development. By August 2020, 5.18 million Venezuelans are recorded to have left the country since a humanitarian crisis began in the mid-2010s.[6] Venezuela

has experienced a "generalized collapse of the country's public infrastructure and services"[7] following a global drop in oil prices, upon which the country's economy relies. Millions have fallen into poverty, and the rise of undernourishment, infectious disease, and untreated medical conditions render survival a daily struggle. President Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian government has compounded the crisis, in which political opponents are imprisoned, journalists silenced, and opposition parties barred from electoral participation.[8] For most Venezuelans, securing a stable livelihood is impossible.

Two Latin American countries in particular are tasked with coping with these displacement crises. Though Mexico has long been a country of origin and transit for migrants, it is evolving into a host country for millions of displaced individuals. More Central Americans are temporarily residing in Mexico than in the past, many with hopes of entering the United States. They face slow processing times and strict U.S. policies, including the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which required tens of thousands of Central Americans to "remain in Mexico" while awaiting asylum hearings.[9] Additionally, Mexico is increasingly becoming a country of permanent destination for Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans. Between 2013 and 2019, asylum claims in Mexico increased six-fold,[10] demonstrating the growing intentions of Central Americans fleeing violence and instability to settle in the country, as opposed to passing through en route to the U.S.

Colombia, like Mexico, has not historically received migrants or asylum seekers, but sent them. Decades of civil conflict have turned more than 9 million Colombians into IDPs and prompted others to request asylum abroad.[11] While trying to resolve its internal instability, Colombia has accepted more Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers than any other country. 1.63 million Venezuelans were living in Colombia by the beginning of 2020, compared to

860,000 who had fled to Peru and about 370,000 in each Ecuador and Chile.[12] While some migrants and asylum seekers stay in Colombia temporarily, planning to travel to other countries in Latin America or further away, most expect to remain in Colombia until the situation in Venezuela improves. As of August 2020, more than 700,000 Venezuelans have been granted residency in Colombia.[13] Accepting foreigners on this scale is unprecedented in Colombia.

Mexico and Colombia share more than this changing migration profile. They are upper middle-income countries[14] and middle powers with considerable influence within Latin America. In 2018, both were in the 25th-50th percentile out of states worldwide for government effectiveness, based on indicators such as quality of policy formulation and implementation, the credibility of governmental commitment to such policies, and perceived quality of public services.[15] The migrants and asylum seekers entering Mexico and Colombia come from neighboring countries that share their hosts' languages and have relatively similar histories and cultures.[16] Critically, government authorities in both Colombia and Mexico have admitted that their migration and asylum processing capacities are overwhelmed.[17]

Given the similarities that exist between Colombia, Mexico, and the situations they face, one might expect a resemblance between the countries' reactions to their migration crises. Instead, their responses reveal notable differences. Colombia is primarily recognizing the Venezuela situation not as a migrant influx, but a refugee crisis. The Colombian government tries to grant Venezuelans access to refugee protections, such as work, housing, and education. It does not involuntarily repatriate Venezuelans and does not prohibit their entry as long as they have a valid or recently expired passport.[18] While Colombia's approach is not perfect–a UNHCR report describes the protection system as "weak"[19]–it has demonstrated a willingness to follow international law, honor human rights, and secure international support.

In contrast, President Andres Manuel López Obrador of Mexico largely describes the incoming populations as migrants, not refugees, reducing the burden on the state for their care. President López Obrador preaches humanitarianism rhetorically, but his policies depict a much different reality. Marked by the creation of a military-linked National Guard security force,[20] a mandate requiring the detention of all undocumented immigrants,[21] and the use of force to prohibit entry,[22] Mexico emphasizes security and defense over adherence to international law. Unlike Colombia's approach, Mexico's has been primarily militarized, not humanitarian.

Under the framework of Jacobsen (1996), states' responses to migration influxes can be compared based on how closely they align with UN protocols. A state may do nothing in response to an influx, respond *positively* by adhering closely to international law, or respond *negatively* by not complying.[23] Utilizing Jacobsen's framework, Colombia's response can be categorized as "positive," while Mexico's response can be categorized as "negative," particularly in comparison to Colombia's response.

Why have Colombia and Mexico approached the influx of migrants and asylum seekers in significantly different ways? I searched an online database of national newspapers from both countries from 2018 to 2020[24] and supplemented initial findings with analysis of government documents, nongovernmental reports, and foreign news sources, which I broadly refer to as "public discourse."[25] Drawing on the four factors that Jacobsen noted as influencing a state's approach to migration and refugee acceptance,[26] I searched for differences in the public discourse between Mexico and Colombia related to the four factors, and found that international relations is the most relevant in explaining Colombia and Mexico's contrasting responses. I update this factor to match the two trends that stood out.[27] First, Colombian public discourse conveys a more widespread understanding of, and sensitivity toward, push-factors of migration

than does the Mexican discourse. This difference in understanding impacts Colombia's conception of its national identity as obligated to accept Venezuelans, while Mexico's national identity does not seem to include this sense of duty towards the Northern Triangle. Second, Colombia displays more regional autonomy than Mexico, withstanding negative pressure from nearby countries (Peru, Ecuador, and Chile) and leveraging its migration profile as a humanitarian leader. Mexico, in contrast, has yielded to the negative migration policies of its neighbor to the north and has not leveraged its migration profile to extract concessions. I argue that, together, these two differences in obligation and regional autonomy impact Colombia's more open, positive response to Venezuelans and Mexico's more closed, negative response to Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans.

My paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief explanation of the connection between obligation in national identity and the international relations factor of migration responses. I then demonstrate how the public discourse in Colombia and Mexico reflects their different national identities and repeat this format with respect to the countries' regional foreign policy and autonomy. To conclude, I discuss the significance of these differences for host countries, migrants, and asylum seekers alike, and the avenues for further study.

National Identity and Immigrant Obligation in International Relations

Accurate terminology is critical in any discussion of human mobility because a person's designation determines the rights they are afforded under international law. "Migrant" describes someone who chose to leave their country of origin and is not prevented from returning. Within Latin America, "refugee" refers to anyone who leaves their country because their "safety or freedom [has] been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts,

massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."[28] Unlike migrants, refugees are owed protections by the states hosting them, including "safety from being returned to the dangers they have fled; access to asylum procedures that are fair and efficient; and measures to ensure that their basic human rights are respected to allow them to live in dignity and safety while helping them to find a longer-term solution."[29] An "asylum seeker" has applied for protections similar to those which refugees are granted, but their claim has not yet been processed.[30] Because of the mixed and fluid nature of legal statuses, I generally use "migrants and asylum seekers" to refer to the "people of concern" in this paper.

Host states adjudicate whether a person meets refugee criteria. Basok notes that while distinguishing between refugees and migrants is straightforward in theory, in reality, "economic misery and political struggles and repression often coexist within the same country. Therefore, from the perspective of an individual migrant, economic and political factors often combine in one's decision to abandon the country."[31] Because of the additional responsibilities for states if the newcomers are refugees, host governments may be incentivized to emphasize the economic situation of the sending-country, framing its citizens as economic migrants. The remedial policies host countries propose reflect the countries' view of the problem and what they believe they "owe" newcomers. The host nation's identity in terms of obligation is therefore related to its relationship with the sending country.

The host country's understanding and interpretation of push-factors–whether it is sensitive or understanding as to why people leave–is critical in forming this identity of obligation. Jacobsen writes, "Where there is widespread knowledge about the conditions in the sending country, and if those conditions are perceived to be an appropriate cause for flight, community sympathy will be higher than if the sending causes are unknown or

misunderstood."[32] Newcomers framed in the public discourse as economic migrants are less likely to be received positively, particularly in economically insecure societies, while refugees and asylum seekers, searching for safety, are more likely to be welcomed. Jacobsen adds that a community's willingness to allow in refugees is further shaped by its members' own experiences of having to flee violence themselves, particularly if the community was formerly welcomed by the country whose citizens it now hosts.[33] Being a people who were formerly refugees is an aspect of national identity. Therefore, the host country's discourse regarding push-factors of migration influences the nature of its national identity and reception of newcomers.

National identity impacts refugee response in another way. Kunz asserts that cultural compatibility between host and sending countries may have "more influence on the satisfactory resettlement of the refugee"[34] than any other factor. The cultural identity of the host country is a determinant of its policies: whether it feels that it shares its values, lifestyle, and traditions with the sending country, and whether or not it feels affinity with the newcomers, will influence whether the host country integrates newcomers with ease. Kunz uses the terms "sib-arrivals" if there is affinity and "non-sib arrivals" if there is not, hinting at the idea of a fraternal relationship between the societies.[35] Cultural compatibility is part of national identity–the sense of who "we" are as a group, how "we" are similar to and different from "them" (based on our understanding of "them"), what "we" stand for, and how "our" identity manifests–and is impacted by the host country's relation with the sending country.

National Identity and Immigrant Obligation in the Colombian Public Discourse

The Colombian public discourse generally conveys an understanding of the severity of conditions in Venezuela and does not emphasize economic causes over other push-factors. When

mentioning Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers for any reason, Colombian newspapers and political leaders frequently contextualize the influx by describing the reasons as to why people flee. For example, an article about the mental effects of migration on Venezuelans informs readers that “it is well known that the country is suffering from a precarious economic situation, that hunger and [trying to] access healthcare are part of daily life, that the minimum wage is less than $5 per month and that the political situation is far from changing.”[36] At the very least, many articles describe what is happening in Venezuela as a “crisis.” They also explain the variety of challenges migrants and asylum seekers face along their journey, detailing daily life back in Venezuela, the danger of crossing borders, the loneliness and discrimination they face upon settling in Colombia, and the bureaucratic hurdles they encounter.

Politicians also demonstrate an understanding of life in Venezuela. For instance, Christian Krüger, the director of Migración Colombia until late 2019, noted that the Venezuelan population “isn’t migrating for pleasure but because it’s obligated to.”[37] Even when the primary intention of an article is not to explain the situation in Venezuela, Colombian publications often mention it anyway. Newsworthy events are not described in isolation but are rather contextualized in history so that the public is aware that the events relate to a crisis forcing people into asylum seeking status.

This multidimensional portrayal of asylum seekers and migrants paints a full picture of Venezuelans in the discourse; they are not simply victims of a political or economic crisis, but people facing challenges familiar to Colombians. The deep understanding of the push-factors induces recognition that the crisis is severe enough that the Venezuelan exodus will not cease in the near future. As if in response, many articles express the need to implement “coordinated regional solutions that meet the long-term needs”[38] of Venezuelans. They describe the

importance of integrating Venezuelans into the labor market, educational systems, and culture. They also include pleas by government officials that migrants and asylum seekers regularize their status by applying for visas that grant them access to services. For example, Krüger said that the government's increasing emphasis on documentation "helps us to protect the rights of the migrants, who often, because they're undocumented, experience labor exploitation."[39] While articles may discuss how regularization and documentation make Colombia safer, they couch it in terms of protecting the rights Venezuelans are afforded under international law. That the public discourse does not primarily frame the situation as a security issue suggests an understanding of the push-factors: Venezuelans are fleeing instability, not seeking to replicate it elsewhere.

The focus on integration in the discourse also indicates a general feeling that it is preferable for Venezuelans to live ordinary lives alongside Colombians than to be marginalized on the fringes of society. They are not perceived to be different enough from citizens for integration to be controversial. The sense of affinity is exemplified in an interview with the Latin American director of Doctors Without Borders who states "Venezuelans are equal to Colombians. We are not different from [Venezuelans] in any way."[40] Indeed, the public discourse in general, including statements by government officials, often uses familial language to describe Venezuelans, such as when President Iván Duque stated that Colombia "has shown brotherhood and nobility by assisting migrants."[41] His statement demonstrates his feeling that Colombia has a connection with Venezuela beyond mere geographical proximity and into the realm of affective relatedness. This rhetoric exemplifies Kunz's idea of cultural compatibility and affinity between the residents of host and sending countries.[42]

Colombian discourse also shows a sense of a shared past with the people of Venezuela. Many news articles and op-eds mention Colombia's history as a sending country and remind readers that Venezuela welcomed a great number of Colombians when they fled violence in their own country. For example, an op-ed by a university researcher writes that the debate on how to assist migrants and asylum seekers hinges on "whether we are willing to treat Venezuelans like we wanted others to treat our own diaspora."[43] An article paraphrases another professor who believes that "We Colombians have a responsibility to the Venezuelans that migrate, because we migrated to their country more than 20 years ago when there was an oil bonanza. 'It is the responsibility of the mayors and the National Government to take measures to welcome Venezuelans that come while the storm passes.'"[44] Because of its own migratory past, and the fact that Venezuela has been the host of such migration, Colombia exhibits a deep sense of obligation to return the favor in Venezuelans' moment of need. Not offering assistance would be unjust and unbrotherly.

I would be incorrect in asserting complete cultural compatibility between Colombia and Venezuela or full and static understanding of the conditions abroad. Indeed, the persistent nature of the crisis may have sparked a shift in public opinion, shown in a 2019 Oxfam research report which found that while Colombians displayed "a general understanding that the majority of migrants leave Venezuela out of necessity, forced by the situation,"[45] anti-immigration feelings and fears were increasing. The report added that 56% of the Colombian population believes that migrants take more from the country than they contribute.[46] This finding could be interpreted to mean that the views of government officials and opinion leaders have not (yet) translated into a similarly welcoming public perception. It may also hint at an incongruence between a general

feeling of obligation to provide basic services to fleeing Venezuelans and a discomfort with deeply integrating them into society, particularly as their numbers grow.

The Colombian public discourse conveys an awareness that enacting policies that only focus on Venezuelans with no attention on their host communities could feed these currents of xenophobia. This awareness has prompted calls on the national government to alleviate unemployment in towns hosting large numbers of migrants and refugees[47] and efforts by public officials to speak more toward the economic capabilities, cultural enrichment, and other benefits that migrants and asylum seekers provide. For example, Krüger has said that, through regularization, Venezuelan migrants are becoming increasingly self-sufficient, contributing to the social security system and "'adding to the country's development.'"[48]

Therefore, although opinions may be changing, much of the public discourse from 2018 to 2020 displayed affinity between the countries, indicating the belief that Venezuelans add to the Colombian identity rather than threatening it. The same Oxfam study found that out of three fears which commonly explain anti-migration sentiment in other parts of the world–fear of economic competition, fear of physical insecurity, and "fear of losing one's national or cultural identity"–this last fear was not prevalent in Colombia, especially in comparison with other large global migration crises, such that of Syrians into Europe.[49] That Colombians are broadly unconcerned about migration and asylum seekers changing or threatening their sense of self displays cultural compatibility between sending and host populations. Colombia's national identity appears flexible enough to include other identities without tarnishing its relevance to the general public. Moreover, the public discourse indicates that to be Colombian means aiding Venezuelans, as Venezuelans have assisted Colombians in decades past.

National Identity and Immigrant Obligation in the Mexican Public Discourse

Mexican public discourse does not demonstrate deep understanding of or sensitivity toward conditions in the Northern Triangle. Regardless of their objective, most articles from Mexican publications do not explain the push-factors prompting people to leave besides a frequent citation of "poverty and violence." Some articles refer to the situation as one of "forced migration," but generally do not provide content as to why it was forced. Migration discourse tends to be simplistic, baldly mentioning a statistic, policy, or meeting without noting the structures or greater dynamics at play; it describes *what* is happening with little interrogation as to *why*. Unlike Colombian news publications, articles by Mexican sources rarely detail the brutality of the migration journey, nor the challenges of accessing basic commodities in Mexico, navigating bureaucratic hurdles, or confronting xenophobia.

The limited understanding of the motivations of Central Americans is further evidenced by the perceived need to use force against them, detain them, and prevent their entry into Mexico by use of the National Guard. Central Americans migrants and asylum seekers are believed to create insecurity, with little acknowledgement of the instability they are fleeing. Discussion of migrants in the press is often presented alongside descriptions of criminal acts. For example, in justifying the deployment of the National Guard, the Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection explains, "We can't be naive, in many cases the crossings and flows of migrants are tied to human trafficking and organized crime, which have made migration one of the biggest businesses."[50] Articles reporting on government efforts to locate migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico show that the apparent goal is documentation for security's sake, with little or no explanation as to the increased access to benefits Central Americans would receive if they possessed a visa or other legal status. The limited understanding–conveyed through limited

discussion–of push-factors is also indicated by the frequent mentions in the Mexican public discourse that the phenomenon can be prevented or halted[51] and resolved quickly. Articles detail that migrants are detained and placed in short-term shelters or tents. They suggest that some basic humanitarian services are provided to migrants and asylum seekers, but with the caveat that these services are temporary, just enough to help the recipients continue on their (assumed) path towards the United States.[52]

The government of Mexico tends not to provide accurate context of life in the Northern Triangle, instead emphasizing economic factors. For example, one article wrote that President López Obrador "considers it urgent to address poverty, unemployment and insecurity, causes that, he added, provoke the phenomenon of migration."[53] This analysis implies that poor economies and undefined "insecurity" are the only push-factors behind the influx. The government additionally indicates a narrow understanding through its policies proposals, the only area in which Mexico demonstrates any sense of obligation to Central Americans. These proposals exclusively address the weaknesses of Central American economies and their need for greater investment, a perspective indicated by headlines such as "Business investment to halt migration, asserts senator."[54] Such proposals might alleviate the poverty and unemployment causing migration, but not the insecurity, violence, corruption, or discrimination which also provoke the phenomenon and for which political reform is needed. President López Obrador is of the mindset that economic growth alone would foster an environment in which "the people don't see migration as necessary,'"[55] overlooking other relevant factors.

The omission in the public discourse of the needs of migrants and asylum seekers contributes to Mexicans' conception of their national identity as one of non-obligation toward helping the Central Americans in their country except in limited, economic ways. My database

search obtained no examples of articles that include any sense of shared regional history between Mexico and the countries of the Northern Triangle. This lack of mutual affinity, and the exclusive conception of national identity that it indicates, arose despite the countries' similar historical trajectory and geographic proximity. Although some Mexican leaders have employed language of fraternity with Central America,[56] unlike in Colombia, the general public discourse and policymaking do not express this same sense of shared identity, shared past, or potential for a shared future. Rather, there is a prominent sense of "us" and "them," demonstrating Kunz's idea that the migrants in Mexico are seen as "non-sib arrivals."[57]

The strong nationalism forged in Mexico around the time of its 1910-1920 Revolution may contribute to its exclusive identity. Since then, Coria and Zamudio report that Mexicans at-large have viewed migrants suspiciously but accepted them if they were able to contribute to the economic, social, or professional needs of the country.[58] This finding correlates with one of the only op-eds in current public discourse that discussed the benefits of migrants, stating, "Let's leave behind that poorly conceived 'nationalism' and welcome any Central American *that is willing to work for this nation*"[59] [emphasis added]. This statement shows that, in the rare cases of considering migrant contributions, Mexicans tend to think positively of migration only if newcomers can work. They also do not appear interested in the broader skills and abilities migrants and asylum seekers possess. More frequently, public conceptions of the current increase in newcomers emphasize it as having a negative economic impact, displayed in a *Washington Post/Reforma* poll result that 64% of the population believes that Central American migrants are a burden on the state "because they occupy jobs and benefits that belong to Mexicans," while only 20% think that migrants "strengthen our country with their work and abilities."[60]

According to a report by the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, the 20th century contributions of Northern Triangle migrants and asylum seekers to Mexican society are largely unstudied,[61] prompting the question of whether they were ever integrated into Mexico or were instead permanently marginalized. This history of not working to incorporate foreigners into the Mexican fabric may contribute to the current discourse, in which there is little discussion of integration, beyond some provision of work permits. Limited attention is paid to the longer-term housing, education, health, and social needs of those Central Americans who are applying for asylum in Mexico. In the infrequent examples of public discourse mentioning services offered, the descriptions tend to be vague. For example, President López Obrador was quoted saying, "It is necessary to speak to migrants, offer options, and protect them. They need to have shelter, if they have families, to take care of their children and find solutions."[62] This lack of concrete proposals again suggests denial that the migration and asylum phenomenon is long-term and implies that Mexico does not feel obligated to treat Central Americans as it would like its citizens to be treated. The discourse also does not mention any benefits to Mexican stability or society if migrants and asylum seekers had access to health care, education, shelter, and other services.

The exclusive national identity may additionally contribute to the strong "othering" of migrants and asylum seekers by the media; they are treated as a unidimensional group distinct from citizens but otherwise unworthy of further examination. My search did not find even surface-level conversations about shared traditions or practices between Mexico and the sending countries. Unlike in the Colombian public discourse regarding Venezuelans, there is little sense that Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans are similar enough to Mexicans that their

integration into Mexico would be desirable or easy. This feeling of cultural compatibility may exist in Mexico, but if it does, its omission from newspapers and other publications is notable.

The Mexican public may not be wholly unaware of the conditions in its neighboring countries, but the overriding trend emerging in news articles is a lack of humanizing migrants, asylum seekers, and their reasons for entering Mexico. This absence of understanding, combined with a lengthy history of not expanding national identity to include newcomers, may impact limited conceptions now of what it means to belong to the country or to be entitled to its assistance. Being Mexican largely does not seem to signify offering assistance to residents of Mexico who are citizens of neighboring countries. The omission of historical truths from news articles, such as past contributions of migrants, might prevent the Mexican public from realizing its country's long tradition of offering asylum, casting the current phenomenon as something new, for which there is no playbook of humanitarianism to follow. A lack of perceived cultural compatibility undermines any affective regional identity that leaders express, overlooks Mexico's past, and shapes the negative reception that Central Americans tend to receive when they enter Mexico today.

Regional Autonomy as an Influence on Immigration Policy

In addition to national identity, regional autonomy in policymaking relates to Jacobsen's category of international relations shaping responses to migration.[63] States that host a large number of migrants and asylum seekers, temporarily or permanently, may leverage their migration profile in their relationship with migrants' and asylum seekers' destination countries. For example, Arar describes how Jordan and Turkey pushed for and won financial assistance and market access from Europe in exchange for preventing Syrian refugees from entering the

European Union (E.U.).[64] Meanwhile, Morocco's hardening policy towards irregular migration can be interpreted both as a bid to increase its (inter)regional status, and as a response to pressure from the E.U.[65] Therefore, while regional autonomy is relevant in forming a state's migration policy, whether it shapes the policy positively or negatively may depend on the relationship between the host and destination states, as well as the amount and direction of pressure involved.

Regional Autonomy Demonstrated in the Colombian Public Discourse

Though the countries nearest Venezuela were initially lauded for their generosity towards Venezuelans, the border policies of many countries surrounding Colombia hardened from 2018 to 2020. Governments implemented these policies in the name of national security, but they have drastically limited the entrance of Venezuelans. In August 2018, Peru began requiring that all migrants and asylum seekers present a passport, which is nearly possible to obtain in present-day Venezuela.[66] In June 2019, Peru announced that Venezuelans could only enter after acquiring a humanitarian visa from a Peruvian embassy or consulate in Venezuela, Colombia, or Ecuador. Venzuelans must show a passport to receive a visa, and they must prove that they also received a visa from Ecuador. Peru simultaneously eliminated humanitarian exceptions that had granted entrance to particularly vulnerable people. Ecuador instituted a passport requirement in August 2018[67] and visa requirement in August 2019, the latter which can only be obtained in Caracas, Bogota, and Lima.[68] It also began requiring that Venezuelans prove a clean criminal record.[69] Chile has implemented policies similar to those of Ecuador and Peru.

As of the beginning of 2020, Colombia has maintained autonomy in welcoming Venezuelans, withstanding the pressure from the hardening policies of the states in its region, even though such policies have intensified its own obligations to migrants and asylum seekers.

Interregional relations is not a major theme apparent in the Colombian public discourse. However, Colombian newspapers do note the effects that the 2018 passport requirements of Peru and Ecuador had on Venezuelans, given that it is "a document that many of them don't have" and thus "many of them, as a result of this decision, will be in a migratory limbo, as the doors close on them after a long journey."[70] The Colombian media and government do not portray the hardening policies as an approach to emulate. One article documents how Venezuelans at the Colombian-Ecuadorian border have been forced into sleeping on the streets in the cold, unable to enter Ecuador and without the funds to travel to Bogota to apply for a visa.[71] Eduardo Stein, the Joint Special Representative to the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, explains how the policies are not solving the migration problem but are rather creating a bottleneck in Colombia while "the [Venezuelan] population keeps trying to cross, but by illegal routes and places, falling into the hands of traffickers, coyotes and delinquents. And children and women are exposed to abuse and harassment, and without the protection that a regularized entrance passage can give them."[72] More explicitly, Krüger stated that Colombia is opposed to the policies of Peru and Ecuador because while it agrees that the states of the region cannot assume full responsibility for the crisis, their policies are not going to stop the migration and asylum seeking.[73]

While neighboring countries have moved against Venezuelans, Colombia has relaxed its entrance requirements to better align with international law. In March 2019, it began allowing Venezuelans whose visas had expired two years previously to enter,[74] and Venezuelans who live on the border of the two countries can now request a Border Mobility Card after supplying proof of Venezuelan national identity.[75] Colombia also does not require demonstration of a clean criminal record.[76] While these looser requirements may remain difficult for some migrants and

asylum seekers to complete, they bring Colombia's policies closer to matching its obligations under UN protocols, while Ecuador, Peru, and Chile's have moved them further away from their commitments to regional solidarity.[77]

While its neighbors' hard-line policies apparently took the Colombian government by surprise,[78] they have only intensified its desire for cooperation. Krüger noted that instead of each country tightening its policies unilaterally, the region needed to work in a "coordinated and organized manner to attend to the situation in the best way."[79] He has encouraged Ecuador to realign with international law to address the real causes of migration, while a mayor of a Colombian town bordering Ecuador said he was hoping for a binational meeting between Ecuador and Colombia to convince the former to reevaluate its policy.[80] Colombia's domestic migration policies can thus be read as shaping and being shaped by regional dynamics; rather than hardening its policy in the face of pressure, as Morocco did in response to the European Union,[81] Colombia may be opening its policy to put humanitarian pressure on Ecuador, Peru, and Chile, strengthening its bid to be a recognized leader on this issue. Indeed, Krüger has stated that he believes Colombia's policies should be replicated throughout the region, as they have shown that less restrictive migration policies are better for the welfare of all.[82] Colombia's relations with its neighbors may be balanced in a way so that it can reasonably hope to leverage its status as the largest host of Venezuelans to stimulate more positive policies and the multilateral responses to which it is committed. The increasingly restrictive policies of Colombia's neighboring countries are compounding the pressure of the migration phenomenon, but Colombia has not succumbed to such pressure. Instead, it has maintained autonomy and leveraged its migration profile to lead humanitarianly.

Regional Autonomy Demonstrated in the Mexican Public Discourse

The United States-Mexico border is a flashpoint for the two countries' relations. Under the Trump Administration, U.S. migration and asylum policies hardened extensively, with narrower humanitarian benefits, greater enforcement, and fewer provisions for legal immigration than under previous administrations.[83] The MPP, mentioned in the introduction, is one policy that has made it more difficult to reach the U.S. and obtain residency. As of August 2020, approximately 67,000 asylum seekers were required to remain in Mexico under MPP,[84] primarily in tents and migrant shelters along Mexico's northern border. Another hard-line policy came in July 2019, when the United States enacted transit country bans, wherein asylum seekers at the U.S. border must prove they undertook the arduous process of applying for asylum in all countries they passed through and were rejected by each.[85] These policies and others closed the door to entry for tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers reaching the southern U.S. border, increasing pressure on Mexico to meet their needs and protect their rights.

Mexico, however, has reacted to the pressure from the U.S. by toughening its own policies towards migrants and asylum seekers. It has not leveraged its migration profile to extract concessions from the United States, as Turkey and Jordan won from the E.U.[86] Unlike the Colombian public discourse, in which non-Venezuelan foreign relations only occasionally appear in the context of the migration crisis, Mexico's relationship with the United States is frequently cited in its news articles. Mexico is often described as being the recipient of U.S. policies or changing its policies as a direct result of U.S. actions. The most emblematic example of this dynamic occurred in mid-2019, when the Trump Administration announced that it would impose progressive tariffs on imports from Mexico, capped at 25%, "unless and until Mexico substantially stops the illegal inflow of aliens coming through its territory."[87] The measure was

called off one week later, after the two countries met and, according to the U.S. State Department, Mexico agreed it would "take unprecedented steps to increase enforcement to curb irregular migration, to include the deployment of its National Guard throughout Mexico."[88]

The Mexican discourse in no way hid the reality that the militarization of Mexico's migratory and asylum policies were a direct result of U.S. pressure. One article reported the news with clear cause-and-effect phrasing, writing "After a week of negotiations in the U.S., the Mexican government, represented by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Marcelo Ebrard, agreed to send 6,000 members of the recently formed National Guard to contain Central American migrants in the south of Mexico."[89] Another article, detailing how Mexico deported more Central Americans in the first half of 2019 than it had since the same period in 2015, explained the change by saying "These statistics from the Guatemalan government demonstrate that the new Mexican [deportation] policies, adopted under pressure from Washington, had a strong impact."[90] The public seems to recognize this unequal relationship; the *Washington Post-Reforma* survey, taken a month after the tariff dispute, found that only 28% of Mexicans believed that the agreement to prevent the tariffs was negotiated between both countries, while 55% believed it was imposed on Mexico by the United States.[91]

As I detailed above, the hardening of Mexico's policies from 2018 through 2019 resulted in migrants being increasingly met with force and asylum seekers with expulsion without an opportunity to present their claims. These changes mirror those implemented in the U.S. throughout Trump's tenure. However, the reaction in Mexico to U.S. policies has not been one-dimensional; the Mexican government has expressed a desire for more collaboration on migration issues. As president-elect back in the fall of 2018, President López Obrador hoped for agreements between the countries of North America to solve the migration crisis, and suggested

plans for the U.S. and Canada to invest in Central America.[92] He tried to push the U.S. to address what he views as the root causes of Central American migration in a December 2018 meeting, in which the U.S. committed to economic development in the region but failed to pledge new funding.[93] A few months later, the U.S. instead cut hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Central America.[94] These unsuccessful attempts to change U.S. policy indicate that Mexico has not leveraged the transit-country portion of its migration profile to extract concessions from the United States; rather, it has been forced to concede in the face of economic threats. Mexico's relationship with its northern neighbor may be too imbalanced for it to strengthen its bid to be a humanitarian regional leader on migration. For example, although Ebrard stated prior to the tariff dispute that even with "the pressure from Trump, the Mexican government will not change its migration policy from one that favors a regular flow and the protection of human rights,"[95] the actions of the Mexican government demonstrate its increased willingness to violate, rather than protect, the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, undermining its humanitarian rhetoric. Instead, U.S. policies have effectively been exported to Mexico, thereby transferring the force- and deportation-driven responses further south on the North American continent and eroding the autonomy of Mexican policy related to Northern Triangle migration.

Conclusion

The distinct identities and regional dynamics of Colombia and Mexico impact their differing responses towards migrants and asylum seekers. Colombia, in understanding the root causes of the exodus, conceiving of its identity as one that helps Venezuelans, and standing up to the negative pressure of its neighbors, has responded in a largely positive, humanitarian way. Mexico, in its lack of comprehensive understanding of the push-factors causing Central

Americans to flee, absence of a sense of obligation towards or shared past with Central Americans, and its submission to pressure from the United States, has reacted negatively and militaristically. There are exceptions to these trends within each country, such as Colombian marches against Venezuelans at the end of 2019,[96] and the many Mexican shelters caring for Central American migrants and asylum seekers. However, the trends in the discourse, propagated by journalists, government officials, and private citizens, do matter; they shape each country's conversation about what type of response is appropriate, influencing high-level policy and low-level interpersonal interactions. Venezuelans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans, many fleeing out of survival, may all be fleeing for their lives, yet whether they obtain safety and stability depends on how the country to which they travel sees itself, its neighboring countries, and them.

The limits of this study provide ample avenues for future research. Exploring the origins of the countries' regional power relations and autonomy, as well as how their national identities did or did not evolve to include immigrant obligation, would be particularly useful. I have shown how these factors influence immigration policy but have not explored their inceptions or development. On-the-ground surveys and in-depth interviews of Mexicans and Colombians would help determine whether there truly is understanding of the push-factors of migration or a sense of obligation towards newcomers, because citizens' attitudes may not be accurately captured by the public discourse accessible from abroad. Finally, future research will want to consider the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the national identities, regional dynamics, and subsequent migration policies of Colombia and Mexico. These studies will be critical in allowing us to better understand how to facilitate more positive responses to welcoming migrants and asylum seekers.

While useful in understanding the scope of crises, dispassionate studies of migration and asylum-seeking risk overlooking the humanity of those that comprise these mass exoduses. Each Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Venezuelan fleeing their home has confronted countless challenges along with a great deal of emotional and psychological pain. Considering that this suffering is shared by millions of people, it is incumbent upon other states in the Western Hemisphere to take drastic measures in response. Host countries must be aware of the aspects of their regional relations and national identity that worsen the experience of these extremely vulnerable populations. Reflecting upon their respective identities and framing of these exoduses will allow them to construct positive and internationally-sanctioned responses to migration crises.

Notes

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