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# The Politics of Generosity. Colombian Official Discourse towards Migration from Venezuela, 2015-2018

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**ABSTRACT. Objective/Context:** As a step towards understanding the nature of power and political action amidst large-scale human mobility, the article analyses how migration from Venezuela emerged in Colombian official discourse between 2015 and 2018. The aim is to trace Colombia's migration policy's leading drivers, widely perceived as a generous response towards an escalating humanitarian crisis. **Methodology:** A context analysis of over 400-plus pieces of information produced by three high-level entities inside the Colombian government was designed. Units of analysis were defined based on van Dijk's (1997) approach to political discourse, while coding of information was traced drawing upon selected scholarship on Critical Border Studies. **Conclusions:** Colombian official discourse between 2015 and 2018 was shaped by pragmatism, focusing on consolidating a schema of specific governmentality by eliciting three interrelated processes: the construction of an imaginary of migration from Venezuela as a process made precarious; the consolidation of a strategy of irregularization; and the centering of 'generosity' as the leading premise for legitimizing political action. **Originality:** The article sheds light on the nature of the power context in which the Colombian government's response to migration from Venezuela emerged by empirically adapting current critical scholarship.

**KEYWORDS:** Venezuelan migration; critical border studies; discourse; irregularization; humanitarianism; generosity; Colombia.

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## La política de la generosidad. El discurso oficial colombiano hacia la migración desde Venezuela 2015-2018

**RESUMEN.** **Objetivo/contexto:** como un paso para entender la naturaleza del poder y la acción política frente a la movilidad humana a gran escala, el artículo analiza cómo la migración desde Venezuela emergió en el discurso oficial colombiano entre 2015 y 2018. Se busca determinar los orígenes de la política migratoria en Colombia, ampliamente entendida como una respuesta generosa a una crisis humanitaria. **Metodología:** se realizó un análisis contextual de más de 400 piezas de información producidas por tres entidades de alto nivel dentro del Gobierno colombiano. Las unidades de análisis fueron definidas siguiendo la aproximación de Van Dijk (1997) al análisis del discurso político, mientras su codificación se estableció a partir de literatura crítica sobre fronteras. **Conclusiones:** el discurso oficial colombiano entre 2015 y 2018 fue formulado pragmáticamente. Se enfocó en generar un esquema específico de gubernamentalidad a través de tres fenómenos interrelacionados: la construcción de una imagen precarizada de la migración desde Venezuela, la consolidación de una estrategia de irregularización y la “generosidad” como premisa para legitimar la acción política. **Originalidad:** se ahonda en el contexto de la respuesta del Gobierno colombiano a la migración desde Venezuela, adaptando de manera empírica literatura crítica actual.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** migración venezolana; estudios críticos de fronteras; discurso; irregularización; humanitarismo; generosidad, Colombia.

## A política da generosidade. O discurso oficial colombiano para a migração originada na Venezuela, 2015-2018

**RESUMO.** **Objetivo/contexto:** como um passo para entender a natureza do poder e da ação política em face da mobilidade humana em grande escala, o presente artigo analisa como a migração originada na Venezuela surgiu no discurso oficial colombiano entre 2015 e 2018. Busca-se determinar as origens da política de migração na Colômbia, amplamente entendida como uma resposta generosa a uma crise humanitária. **Metodologia:** uma análise contextual foi realizada com mais de 400 peças informativas produzidas por três entidades de alto escalão dentro do governo colombiano. As unidades de análise foram definidas de acordo com a aproximação de van Dijk (1997) à análise do discurso político e sua codificação foi estabelecida a partir da literatura crítica sobre fronteiras. **Conclusões:** o discurso oficial colombiano entre 2015 e 2018 foi formulado pragmaticamente. Centrou-se em dar origem a um esquema específico de governança por meio de três fenômenos interrelacionados — a construção de uma imagem precarizada da migração originada na Venezuela; a consolidação de uma estratégia de desregulação, e o foco na “generosidade” como premissa para legitimar a ação política. **Originalidade:** aprofunda-se no contexto da resposta do governo colombiano com respeito à migração originada na Venezuela e adapta empiricamente a literatura crítica atual.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** migração venezuelana; estudos críticos de fronteiras; discurso; desregulação; humanitarismo; generosidade; Colômbia.

## Introduction

Why do some governments design open-armed reception policies towards cross-border migrants in need while others do not? Is it mostly a matter of humanitarian principles, as officers working on the subject tend to claim? Or are these actions intertwined with political control strategies over migrants, even if often presented as morally driven? Building on the latter question, the literature on mobility and border studies has suggested the need for identifying how governments and social institutions appropriate humanitarianism as a means for renewing mechanisms of control and exclusion over migrants and refugees (Tazzioli 2020; Scheel 2019; Nyers 2018). Following this line, it is possible to identify how governments and related actors tend to use discursive elements to shield the implementation of subjectivization and political control strategies that escape mere humanitarian motivations. ‘Generosity’ is one of them. This value, loosely defined as “doing good to other people or contributing to [the] common good” (Komter 2010, 443), has been included in the discursive definition of recent policy developments in Colombia, the primary recipient of Venezuelans in one of the world’s largest ongoing mobility processes.

Mainstream literature has presented the Colombian case as a humanitarian exception globally, as the reception of refugees and migrants in need in other regions of the world has become more difficult. Between 2015 and 2020, the middle-income country received at least 1.8 million migrants and almost one million returnees from crisis-hit neighbor Venezuela, according to official data (R4V 2020). Overall, this accounts for about 5% of Colombia’s current population. Some scholars, organizations, and fellow governments have agreed that the political and economic measures implemented to cope with the issue have been “widely generous” (Seele and Bolter 2020, par.3), an “example at the regional level” (Panayotatos 2019, 4), and a model of “extraordinary solidarity” (UNHCR 2018, par.9).

However, the political setting this response is constructed on has not been fully unpacked. Even if some of the measures implemented can be read as part of a constructive humanitarian response, and many actors may confirm its positive impact on migrants’ lives, the political reasoning behind these policies remains widely unexplored. As the first step in this task, this article analyses how migration from Venezuela emerged as a topic of concern in Colombian official discourse between 2015 and 2018 (two significant moments of the process according to the government’s narrative on this mobility process), and how generosity turned out to be the leading associated concept for migration management during this period.

The argument is that the discourse of generosity, unpacked by the Colombian government in this period, resulted from a set of pragmatic moves

aimed at consolidating the governmentality of migration from Venezuela by eliciting three interrelated processes. The first was the construction of an imaginary around mass migration as a phenomenon of precarization. The second was the consolidation of a strategy of irregularization, making 'the migration flow' an object of policy and 'the migrants' surveillance and control subjects. The third was the centering of generosity as the leading premise of political action, as a move within a broader political strategy, including balancing domestic needs with international aspirations. In the end, these political developments allowed for the emergence of an artificial dichotomy between security and dispossession that has been influential in the regional migration debate ever since.

The text is organized as follows. Section one presents the methodology for conducting the study, a mixed design involving context analysis and qualitative inductive research; sections two to four present the findings chronologically; section five discusses some of the major findings after approaching the politics of generosity in Colombian official discourse. Finally, a conclusion is offered.

## Methodology

'Discourse' can be seen as a technology "by which individuals imbue reality with meaning" (Ruiz 2009, 3); speech acts being one of its most visible manifestations. The particular interest here is in political discourse, which, drawing upon Teun van Dijk's research, is related to the construction of meanings in the public sphere as well as to how contexts and interactions between different actors are embedded in power's continuities and changes (van Dijk 1997, 14-15). A practical way of disentangling the actions undertaken by ruling powers (i.e., governments) is to label their actions as 'official,' widely used as a synonym of 'public' or 'governmental.' Thus, an 'official discourse' can be loosely defined as the set of procedures by which ruling powers imbue the political realm or the particular setting in which they exert their influence, with meaning.

Tracing the evolution of discourses in the recent history of Colombia's migration management required methodological preparation. The study's time range was set according to two moments between 2015 and 2018, steadily presented as definitive in the literature (Rodríguez and Robayo 2019). Albeit evidence suggesting that ongoing migration from Venezuela to Colombia had already been increasing before, the perception of it being massive in official discourse arose only after the first date (Pineda and Ávila 2019), which informed the initial setting of my observation. The second date coincides with the end of a constitutional presidential term and the beginning of a new administration. The ruptures,

transitions, and continuities concerning migration management constitute a broader topic beyond the scope of the analysis.

Moreover, I focused on discourses produced by high-ranking governmental authorities and their effects after evidencing that such institutions led the intertwined speech acts. During a first exploratory, inductive research round based on media observation and documentary analysis, the position of these entities in defining the discourse became evident, allowing me to conceptually define my object as ‘Colombian official discourse’ towards migration from Venezuela, as directed from three institutions at the top of the government’s hierarchy. I thus focused on the *President of the Republic*, chief of state and government, the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)*, in charge of issues related to migration and human mobility, and *Migración Colombia (MIGCOL)*, the national policing authority on human mobility which depends on the MFA and which plays a technical, security-related, role. There is a direct hierarchical subordination between the three institutions. Moreover, each one oversees a different level of policy execution.

These institutions are constant producers of a wide range of public data, largely available on their official online sites. I centered on press releases, official communiqués and declarations, and interviews, both in written and audio formats, available on these institutions’ official websites. I left aside other data types such as statistics, processed reports, or digital infographics, which reflected less clearly speech acts in place. The relevant data was manually identified during the period September 2019 - June 2020. Moreover, the process left a database made up of over 400 pieces of written information. Non-written information was transcribed accordingly when possible.

The information was the object of a context analysis to see how relevant actors “use symbols and insert communication with meaning” and how these help us to “solve questions that involve extracting meaning from communication” (Hermann 2008, 151-152). I inductively defined a set of five codes to evaluate the relevance of some terms over others in political speech, following van Dijk’s proposal. I started by observing the number of times these were repeated throughout the available information.<sup>1</sup> Further, I organized data over a matrix of three themes generated during the collection process, which allowed me to evidence the meaningful relations between codes and themes (Hsieh and Shannon 2018, 393).<sup>2</sup> Contextualization, the process of contrasting the analyzed information with the historical setting in which it was produced, was complemented by relying on media and secondary documentary sources.

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1 ‘Venezuelans’, ‘Border’, ‘Control’, ‘Irregular migrant’, ‘Migration’

2 Policy creation and implementation, Security, and Humanitarian action

Furthermore, the analysis of codes and themes was built upon recent research on critical border and migration studies. I used Nyers' (2018) and Squire's (2011) approaches to 'irregularization' amidst mobility processes and Tazzioli's (2020) frame on how ruling power subjectivizes migrant groups as 'unruly mobs' to guide power actions embedded in official discourses. This literature's conceptual use is presented along with the study's findings, which were chronologically divided into three moments, as shown next.

## 1. Walking a tightrope: August 2015 – June 2016

Mass human mobility departing from Venezuela became a matter of concern across South America around the mid-2010s. This period coincides with the acute detriment of the country's social and economic situation and the political turmoil that followed the power transition from former president Hugo Chávez to current leader Nicolás Maduro in 2013. Several authors mention August 2015 as a breaking point for the Colombian case marking the beginning of an unprecedented massive inflow of people from the country's most important neighbor (Ramos and Rodríguez 2019, 551). Resulting from an operation conducted by Maduro's government, some 2,000 Colombian nationals were deported from Venezuela over a few days (Márquez 2019, 503). With them, another 20,000 persons, mostly relatives, would return to Colombia within a couple of months (OCHA 2015, 1).

Until that moment, Venezuela had been a significant recipient of Colombians. During the 1970s and the 1980s, the oil-rich country was an attractive destination for its impoverished neighbors, and through the 1990s and early 2000s, it became a safe haven for those escaping political and drug-trafficking-related violence (Mejía 2012, 190-191). Over time, the community turned into a tightly-knit diaspora, whose descendants are entitled to both nationalities today. Meanwhile, at the border, a vivid and deeply interconnected borderscape persisted, despite years of political animosity conducted from Bogotá and Caracas. Yet, at the beginning of the 2010s, tensions de-escalated between presidents Juan Manuel Santos and Chávez. The latter's support of the peace efforts with the FARC guerrilla conducted by the former was a major political determinant at the time (Nasi and Rettberg 2019, 69).

However, along with Chávez's death, the dramatic fall of international oil prices, years of economic mismanagement, and increasing political instability, the relation began to deteriorate again. A turning moment was the launching of Maduro's 'People's Liberation Operations' (PLO) by mid-2015. Ávila (2017, 57) explains that the function of this set of "joint procedures executed by diverse security bodies [in] areas where elements of criminal groups operate[d] as proxies

of Colombian paramilitaries [and] criminal gangs” was to conduct a form of “punitive populism,” directed at both regaining the Venezuelan electorate’s attention and sending a disciplining message to the local population. Bogotá was aware of Colombians living on the Venezuelan side of the border being already subject to criminalization and unlawful deportations before the PLO launch (Rodríguez and Ito 2016, 170). Yet, Santos’s government had remained cautious, as the peace process with the FARC was ongoing and its political capital was at stake. But the massiveness and mediatization of August’s deportations obliged him to address the issue, marking the entrance of ‘return’ migration from Venezuela into Colombian official discourse.

Meanwhile, Maduro’s government closed official crossing points, directly impacting both human mobility and economic life. A week later, Santos addressed a message to the deportees remarking that Colombia was certainly “their country” and that they “should not feel like foreigners in their own land” (Presidencia 2015a). His Minister of Foreign Affairs, María Ángela Holguín, echoed that same message a day later, by stating that “the Colombian state [would] deliver every effort for them, and for those who want[ed] to come back [...] to make them feel they have opportunities in their own country” (MRE 2015a). The official communication avoided presenting confrontational language, emphasizing the humanitarian nature of the situation while labeling it a ‘border crisis.’ As a result of this evasive move, MIGCOL assumed the leadership in shaping official discourse.

Thus, during the first week of September 2015, the migration authority published a press release implying that 800,000 Colombians lived in Venezuela (Migración 2015a), directly contesting the 6 million mentioned Maduro’s government days before (Peñalosa 2015, par.2). Further, the policy framework of the migrants’ humanitarian reception was outlined. By mid-month, MIGCOL informed of a bill on family reunification (Migración 2015b). Venezuelan nationals being relatives of Colombian returnees were given the option to obtain a special resident permit that would lead them to Colombian nationality if desired.

The reasons for this were manifold. These humanitarian-like measures aimed partly to answer domestic and international audiences who perceived the situation as a catastrophe brought about by a regime whose treatment of human rights was widely questioned. Still, beyond pure altruism, Santos’s government needed to balance presenting his government as functional and as a human rights advocate before his international stakeholders while reinforcing a sense of nationhood among his domestic audience. The latter was already divided because of his approach of ending a decades-long violent conflict through a peace-negotiation. However, his government was interested in achieving this task without risking the Maduro regime’s position amid the peace process, being one of the



key actors that safeguarded interlocution with FARC (Borda and Morales 2017, 245). The government was willing to keep the strategic contact, even if it implied obviating the rights of some Colombians living on the other side of the border.

The balancing act was evidenced in a speech given by the Colombian President in Quito by the end of September, during a meeting hosted by the Ecuadorian government to resolve the ongoing border situation:

“I am very pleased to re-establish this dialogue with Venezuela [...] We respect it if Venezuela wants to close the border if Venezuela wants to deport Colombians that do not have their documentation in order. *They have the right to do so*. The only thing we asked for was for them to respect their rights the due diligence. Now we are going to investigate what actually happened...” (Presidencia 2015b, emphasis added)

This choice led to obviate some of the short and mid-term mobility consequences of both the migration inflow and the political response. Maintaining the bilateral setting was the main objective while surrounding mobility issues were perceived as complementary. Meanwhile, the border remained closed from the Venezuelan side until July 2016. Mobility policy seems to have been directly managed by the migration office as Colombian government elites focused on peace negotiations; in fact, the MFA did not express any relevant concern on the matter until December 2016. The Presidency did not refer to the issue in official communications until March 2017.

However, large-scale migration from Venezuela, including that of Colombian returnees, was already a concern in March 2016 for other instances, as evidenced in a communiqué from MIGCOL (Migración 2016a). It pointed out that since February, passports were a requirement for Venezuelans to enter Colombia overland, something unprecedented at the time. Interestingly, it was informed that since the enforcement of those measures, there had been “intercepted in irregular crossing points, and returned to their country, 21 Venezuelans that had intended to *enter Colombia illegally*” (Migración 2016a, emphasis added). This language was a wake-up call for what was about to come after Maduro’s government opened the border a few months later, amidst another wave of economic turmoil.

## The dawn of irregularization: July 2016 – July 2017

Several critical scholars working on mobility control politics challenge the notion that the irregular status of migrants can be objectively determined (Nyers 2018, 3-4). Accordingly, this is not something *inherent* to the individuals that enter and/

or stay in a country without the official documentation or permits required by the ruling authority. Rather, it is “a condition *produced* through various processes of (ir)regularization” to constitute the movement of people “as an object of and as a subject of politics” (Squire 2011, 5, emphasis added). Thus, “it is produced through movements and activities of national, international and/transnational agencies as well as through the movements and activities of migrants and citizens” (Squire 2011, 8). From July 2016 on, right after the Venezuelan government opened the border, a strategy of production of irregularity became implicit in Colombian official discourse to govern increasing mobility.

During the eleven months that the border remained closed, Venezuela’s economic and social situation worsened dramatically (Corrales 2017, 30). Shortages of food and essentials became constant, while the Bolívar lost its value to hyperinflation. The consequences were evident. News sources stated that up to 200,000 persons crossed the border looking for food, medicines, and other supplies during the first two ‘trial weekends’ in which transit was allowed. Local and international media reported images of massive crowds entering Colombia from the main crossing point between Villa del Rosario and San Antonio. The migration authority was aware of the political impact that such images could have. It was keen to inform that the great majority of the individuals entering the country were returning to Venezuela after stocking up, and that “against what some think, and the emerging fear of some locals, [they] have been slowly returning to their homes” (Migración 2016b).

The border opened in August officially. The day before, the Colombian government announced a new measure directed to the Venezuelans that wanted to enter the country. They were required to apply online for a new ‘Migratory Border Transit Card’ (TMTF), which would be available for residents of the border’s Venezuelan side. It would allow them to stay in Colombian border municipalities for up to 30 days without presenting a passport or visa as “the first step for a future migratory document for the border inhabitants” (Migración 2016c). In practice, this made it possible to differentiate publicly and legally a ‘migration flow,’ limited to the borderzone, while communicating to the domestic audience that the situation was under control. Writ large, this measure constituted a first step in turning migration from Venezuela into an object of control, as these measures aimed to separate the ‘flow’ from the rest of the population. Besides, this was sustained by introducing a specific vocabulary when addressing the issue to the public, given an inexistent immigration tradition.

In September 2016, a month after the TMTF was implemented, MIGCOL issued a press release answering to “those that affirm[ed] that Venezuelan citizens [were] *irregularly* overstaying” (Migración 2016d, emphasis added). This

communiqué revealed that the Colombian government was aware of the growing mediatization of the issue. Local and international media had been reporting on how Venezuelans were constituting a new diaspora in the country, at the border and beyond, aiming to stay at least temporarily (Páez and Vivas 2017, 8). Yet, to that moment, the official discourse had sustained that the phenomenon was only stationary. Moreover, the language of migrant irregularity, something almost inexistent at the time, was inserted into the official discourse. Hence, the first effects of these measures were about to be evidenced in the months to come.

In October 2016, MIGCOL informed of some operations against irregularized migrants carried out in major Colombian cities. For instance, five Venezuelan musicians working in Barranquilla (north of the country) were “expelled” after “a verification process [...] initiated due to the complaint of a citizen” (Migración 2016e). Three weeks later, another communiqué with the title “MIGCOL deports 15 Venezuelan women” was published, which stated that the authority “had deported more than 1,600 Venezuelans in 2016” (Migración 2016f). These press releases showed how the move towards irregularization enabled the government to police migrants. The first case spread the message to foreigners that working without the proper documentation shall be considered an offense. The second one evidenced how Venezuelan women were turned into particular subjects of policing. There was no explicit reference to the cause of their deportation. Yet, the communiqué appeared to answer media and social organizations’ reports on the rise of sexual exploitation of Venezuelan women in Colombia (Pineda and Ávila 2019, 82). The implicit message was that irregularity prevailed as an individual defining trait –what justified control through deportation– even in cases of serious misconduct against personal integrity. It also legitimized gender-based discriminatory control measures.

Further, the need for controlling statistics as the scientific basis for legitimate political action became evident. Two main forces were at play once MIGCOL began to lead the systematic publication of numbers on migration from Venezuela starting from November 2016. The first was the government’s will to have access to accurate data, as unofficial border crossings comprised a large extent of mobility. Those records had not been kept systematically before, with authorities being forced to rely on data of independent organizations, journalists, or the Venezuelan government. Secondly, these statistics were essential to justify official action scientifically. Thus, after 90 days of border opening, the migration authority reported a net migratory inflow of 65,000 persons, counted at official border crossings (Migración 2016g). Yet, this was not enough. Irregularized migrants living in Colombia were not being reflected in these statistics. Meanwhile, public opinion concerns about their whereabouts grew as they began to access the labor market and health and education services (Ordoñez and Ramírez 2019, 49).

This complex scenario was related to implementing “a nationwide Special Verification Plan” launched in February 2017 (Migración 2017d). MIGCOL explained that its purpose was “not to prosecute foreign citizens but to guarantee their security and that of fellow [Colombian] countrymen” (Migración 2017d). The text also stated that Colombian citizens

“must understand that the only way to stop irregularity is by respecting and enforcing our laws. [They] cannot ask for actions against irregular migration when, on the other hand, [they] take advantage of it, by paying less or hiring people without all law requirements” (Migración 2017d).

Irregularization worked as a mechanism of control and policing. It associated the migration flow (object of the policy) with migrants (subjects of control) in a particular political setting, in which citizens and non-citizens interacted as directed by the ruling power. Additionally, migrants’ ‘irregularity’ legitimized specific control actions over the subjectivized population. Hence, new control measures were to be accepted, at first by members of the ‘host’ community and later by migrants themselves. The leadership of the technical authority was essential in this procedure. Additionally, the lack of a prior history of immigration to the country led high political spheres to underestimate the issue’s impact. As a reflex, migration management started from appealing to a particular security tradition, stemming from the country’s protracted armed conflict and the structural violence that persists to these days. The irregularization strategy, implemented as a day-to-day security practice, allowed for this transition (Fierke 2015, 125).

After reaching an agreement with the former FARC guerrilla in November 2016, the bilateral ties over the peace process were severed, and political tensions rose again. By the end of 2016, a new intermittent border closing was ordered by Maduro’s government. By March 2017, a military-related incident occurred in a rural zone at the border, between the Arauca and Apure regions. A complete border closing was decreed from the Venezuelan side. The tension escalated rapidly amidst increasing evidence that Venezuela’s economic and social situation, now labeled as a humanitarian crisis by organizations such as Human Rights Watch, was worsening.

Meanwhile, mobility towards Colombia kept increasing. The use of unofficial border crossings mushroomed, with extortion cases, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling rising dramatically (Prather 2019, 17). By the end of April 2017, Santos, for the first time publicly, addressed migration from Venezuela specifically. In Cúcuta, the main Colombian city at the border, he announced that a ‘Border Mobility Card’ (TMF), an extension of the TMTE, would be required for Venezuelans in the zone commuting to Colombia. Specifically, he expressed that:

“The person without this card nor a valid passport will be declared as *illegal* in our country. If they (sic) do not have the card or the passport, they (sic) must not enter, and if they (sic) enter and are later captured, they (sic) will be declared *illegals* and later will be deported [...] Yet, Colombians and Venezuelans are brothers, and this goes further than a simple phrase [...] We shall not incur in xenophobia nor discrimination” (Presidencia 2018c, emphasis added).

This speech confirmed the words of MIGCOL’s Director a couple of weeks before, stating that “Colombia is an open-door country for foreigners, as long as they are willing to respect [the] migratory rules, [as] it is true that free mobility is a right, but we [Colombians] shall not forget that our freedom ends where that of others begins” (Migración 2017e). Hence, officials coated control, subjection, and policing with benevolence while suggesting that the state was stringent but fair at the same time. It was a call to the domestic audience but also an appeal at the international level. Furthermore, the Colombian government wanted to show how it was responding in a humanitarian manner to an escalating *problem*. Progressively, this resulted in a new discursive direction.

## Generosity as a premise: July 2017- August 2018

Recent research suggests that migrant groups are presented “as unruly mobs to downplay the political dimension of their struggles for movement and to thwart the possibility of a multiplicity becoming a collective political subject” (Tazzioli 2020, 16). In principle, such a discursive move would allow the ruling power to exert control and extend policing more freely over migrants. However, in contexts in which humanitarianism is understood as a shared value, the exercise of raw power is somehow disciplined by the moral setting in place. Thus, policing and control are necessarily subjected to a set of codes that make them morally acceptable. The development of Colombian official discourse between July 2017 and August 2018 reveals how such a scaffolding was constructed. Under the leading premise of solidarity towards migrants coming from Venezuela, a complex governmentality strategy developed based on exerting control and authority under a humanitarian umbrella.

Venezuela’s domestic setting was decisive. In 2017, major internal disruptions caught international attention. The opposition-led National Assembly was deprived of its legislative powers by the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court at the end of March, constituting “a rupture of the constitutional order” (Bull and Rosales 2020, 5). This action resulted in weeks-long violent turmoil across the

country amidst continuing food shortages and a generalized economic crisis. By May, the government had announced the creation of a National Constituent Assembly, which acted as a *de facto* legislative body. By June, international organizations had made serious allegations against “high-level officials in charge of security forces” because of their implication in “widespread abuses” (HRW 2017, p.3). Simultaneously, the expectations of increasing migration among the Colombian public rose (Migración 2017f). However, until July 2017, MIGCOL denied “a massive exodus of Venezuelans [as] that would be raising fake alarms” (Migración 2017g).

Nevertheless, the Colombian government announced structural measures towards migration after confirming that several countries of the region alongside the United States agreed on the situation representing a crisis. Thus, the MFA tried to raise the issue’s profile at the Organization of American States (MRE 2017a). However, no consensus was reached there, as several countries backed Venezuela either through their refusal or abstention to approve a resolution to declare a ‘rupture of the constitutional order,’ thus activating the possibility of humanitarian intervention through the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Therefore, the Colombian government decided to support a parallel multilateral working faction. This resulted in the formation of the ‘Lima Group,’ essential for presenting the Venezuelan situation as an international humanitarian crisis abroad. It was also fundamental in making the case against Maduro’s government, as the main responsible behind the migratory situation.

By the last week of July 2017, Colombian authorities launched a Special Sojourn Permit (PEP) for irregularized Venezuelans. It was directed at “between 150,000 and 180,000 [persons] who had entered through *legal* checkpoints [and] had their passport stamped but had overstayed their original 90 days’ permit and [were] not *legal* anymore” (MRE 2017c, emphasis added). The document allowed these persons to access the formal labor market and health and education services for up to two years. Yet, it was neither valid as a travel document nor as a passport replacement. Initially, this was considered an exceptional measure for those entering the country before August 1, 2017. However, till June 2020, there had been eight different government bills extending the dates and conditions of such permits, leaving around 690,000 persons bearing this document (Migración 2020, par.2). Meanwhile, the document’s emission enabled the government to extend the definition of this population of concern.

During the first days of August 2017, the MFA declared that with such measures, the Colombian government was “willing to help those Venezuelans crossing the country but going further south to Ecuador, Peru or Chile” (MRE 2017b). Such declaration came just a couple of days before several countries in

the region, including Peru, Chile, and Argentina, declared their official stance towards Maduro's regime amidst the ongoing political turmoil. They condemned the "breakdown of democratic order in Venezuela" (Lima Group 2017, sec. 1) and declared their commitment "to peacefully achieving the restoration of democracy in the country" (Lima Group 2017, sec. 16).

Generosity in Colombian official discourse was only possible once the government secured the implicit political endorsement of other countries in the region, directly affected if transit mobility across Colombia was officially allowed. Hence, the geographical pattern of regional migration was also a discourse driver. Furthermore, this partially explains the Colombian government's delay in concretely defining a political position towards Venezuela's domestic turmoil. Without regional acceptance of the situation as a humanitarian crisis and a consensus on who was responsible for this state of affairs, the political costs of allowing mobility into and across Colombia had to be assumed solely by Santos's government. From then on, the Colombian government presented generosity as a collective, international, moral endeavor.

Meanwhile, a new public debate emerged in Colombia. Asked about the possibility of opening refugee camps at the border, MIGCOL's Director answered that "such would be only a last option for the government [as] that would be only a temporary solution" (Migración 2017a). He added that they were "looking *to integrate* these persons into society and not ostracize them" (Migración 2017a, emphasis added). 'Integration' appeared as a new term that would also turn into a tool to solve 'irregularity.' Such can be inferred from a similar declaration made in September 2017:

"Closing the border would only boost more irregularity. What we must do [...] is search for tools that will allow us *to integrate* these *foreigners* into *our society*. This effort is not exclusively the job of MIGCOL or the Colombian state. Here, *we all must play our part...*" (Migración 2017b, emphasis added)

Thus, the discourse's focus shift to generosity is exemplified through the emergence of 'integration.' It implies summing an external object ('foreigners' or, as it has been argued before, a migration flow) to an existing closed-up compound ('our society'). However, before achieving this, the foreign population had already been identified as an irregularized subject of control through policing. The solution presented was a joint venture between the state and Colombian citizens ('we all must play our part'), as two players who had to share their efforts to control a third, different, otherized party. However, the integration option



appeared as a legitimate tool, coated by generosity, also propelled by the government's stance towards its Venezuelan counterpart. A political dichotomy thus emerged, which reduced understanding migration from Venezuela to an artificial continuum between irregularization and dispossession, accentuating the denial of migrants' agency and their stand as legitimate political actors.

Recalling Tazzioli, 'integration' offered a way of governing migration by limiting migrants' chances of becoming political subjects, just as irregularization had done before. The way to organize such an 'unruly mob' implied allowing them to be part of an established social setting, justified by generosity's moral endeavor. Yet, subjected individuals had to comply with the conditions for control and policing in place, such as 'regularity,' as these act as technologies for managing and disciplining the 'mob' they comprise. In other words, generosity was only possible if migrants were willing to follow the rules of their own control, already set through irregularization as a disciplinary strategy.

Meanwhile, the ruling power, presenting itself as a moral polity, looked for increased legitimacy beyond the purely legal aspect. By the end of September 2017, MIGCOL informed that 470,000 Venezuelans lived in the country. Some 200,000 were documented. The number was presented as evidence of the "will of Venezuelan citizens to regularize their migratory status, by respecting our [Colombian] normativity" (Migración 2017c).

Concurrently, Santos addressed the UN General Assembly. He reiterated how painful it was to watch how Venezuelan "democracy was being destroyed [...] how [its] political opposition was being persecuted [and] how human rights were being systematically violated" (Presidencia 2017a). Yet, migration was not mentioned. The Colombian government was seemingly still flirting with the idea that mobility from Venezuela could be a temporary phenomenon. On this, later in mid-October 2017, the MFA would argue that numbers of migrants remained stable, an action directed to the domestic audience, increasingly concerned about the issue (MRE 2017d). In point of fact, due to access to housing and health services, tensions between locals and newcomers were rising along the border. (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 2018, 24). Further, national debates on the use of resources to palliate the effects of migration widened. By the year's end, migration from Venezuela had become an essential topic of the agenda, and this was confirmed a couple of months later.

The U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Colombia in February 2018 meant a symbolic moment in constructing Colombian official discourse. It marked the public acceptance by the head of state that migration shall be conceived as a long-term issue in the country's politics and not just as a transitory one. After their meeting, Santos established that:



“It is urgent to restore the democratic path in Venezuela [...] The acute crisis experienced in our neighboring country brings enormous consequences for Colombia and our region [...] Colombia is ready for keeping up with the humanitarian assistance to our Venezuelan brothers” (Presidencia 2018a).

Those words after a meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State were not a coincidence. The Colombian government needed to confirm Washington’s support for migration management, something subordinated to Santos’s government’s complete alignment with regime change in Venezuela. Once the terms of this interaction were agreed upon, migration from Venezuela became an integral part of Colombian foreign policy. Two days after Tillerson’s visit, Santos declared that migration was “a direct result of Maduro’s policies [as] migration result[ed] from [him] denying the aid that Colombia and the international community had offered constantly” (Presidencia 2018a). He also declared that the United Nations System and international organizations were essential “to handle the problem with pragmatism, objectivity, and effectiveness” (MRE 2018b). He tried to legitimate his government’s policy towards what had become a decisive matter domestically while looking for resources in front of other nations.

That same day, a new package of measures was announced. The Presidency designated a Special Advisor for the Colombian-Venezuelan border, whose role would be to organize the execution of migration-related policies on the local and national levels (MRE 2018b). Besides, a new department within MIGCOL was created. The tasks of the Special Group for Migration were “to control irregular migration, to guarantee the rights of [migrant] children and teenagers, to work on security and public space, and to support the fight against commodity smuggling” (Migración 2018f). In time, both moves would show a higher degree of specialization in migration’s government. The more technical-bureaucratic instances were separated from pure policing structures, as it was accepted that roles at national and local levels needed to be harmonized.

Santos himself summarized the core of the official discourse. “All institutions and Colombians must work together to face this challenge [migration]. Our motto must be *authority, control, and generosity*” (MRE 2018f). These words exemplify how migration management in Colombia has been approached predominantly ever since. On the one hand, there is a security stance configured by day-to-day policing practices. On the other, a humanitarian approach arose as a political option in a larger political strategy mediated through the confrontation with the Maduro government and the full alignment with the United States and other governments in the region.

Some perks of the ‘Venezuelan migration crisis’ were also identified promptly. The Colombian government insisted on showing international audiences how it assumed the situation with generosity, which could be viewed as a result of financial concern and a status-seeking move. In declarations after a meeting with the Peruvian government in Lima in mid-February 2017, the Minister of Foreign Affairs said:

“As time goes by, conditions of Venezuelans who arrive are worse. They need medicines, hospitals, and, especially, food. [...] We make a call to the international community. Colombia has taken measures to face this challenge with order and legality. We want to regularize all those people who have irregularly entered so that they can stay in Colombia with a [regular] migratory status” (MRE 2018e).

In March, the MFA informed the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, and the Spanish Secretary for International Cooperation had announced two million Euro for Venezuelan migrants (MRE 2018c). It was not the first time that the Colombian government received aid from the international community for migration management. Yet, this communiqué was the first to be directly addressed by the minister’s office, emphasizing who the financial partners were and how much they were willing to donate. It constituted a message for the Colombian audience, who expected the government to increase action on resource-seeking. Besides, it was a way to attract other high-level prospective donors committed to humanitarian causes, in a context in which the country already was an important recipient of international aid tied to the recently achieved peace agreement (Teff and Payanotatos 2019, 4).

The control-authority-generosity triad was also underway domestically. MIGCOL informed of “3,000 verification processes in 17 cities [in which] some 200 foreigners were deported, about 80 were expelled, and some 60 businesses were indicted for hiring foreigners without law requirements” (Migración 2018a). Moreover, in April, the government announced an “Administrative Registration of Venezuelan Migrants” (RAMV), which aimed to make a census of the irregular Venezuelan population in the country (MRE 2018d).

This period coincided with the soaring of long-distance walking and hitchhiking as visible practices among migrants from Venezuela. Media and some organizations labeled these persons as ‘walkers’ (Tariuck Broner 2018, par.1). Following the Agamben tradition of ‘bare life,’ it is difficult to disassociate this terminology from a speech act that presented these persons as dispossessed living things that walk South America’s roads. Moreover, the official discourse was

also impacted as the issue escalated, and a large extent of the public came into immediate contact with the idea of ‘mass migration.’

Thus, in May 2018, MIGCOL stated that some 3,000 persons were leaving the country daily through the border crossing point of Rumichaca at the Colombian-Ecuadorian border, part of the “700,000 Venezuelans [that] had transited towards other destinations, especially, Ecuador, Peru and Chile” in the last year (Migración 2018b). This message intended to boost the idea that many of the so-called walkers were only transiting the country and thus relieve increasing domestic pressures. It also sought to reinforce the Colombian negotiating position before other recipient governments in the region. The preceding became evident in June, as the director of MIGCOL stated in a new meeting of the ‘Lima Group’ that:

“Migration of Venezuelan citizens is not an exclusively Colombian issue. We are appealing to other countries in the region to turn the spotlight on this, so we can search together for alternatives that allow us to take care of them [migrants]. It is our duty, as a brotherhood of nations, to reach out to the Venezuelan people...” (Migración 2018d).

Growing tensions amidst locals and migrants also informed official discourse. Yet, the government was cautious in this respect during the analyzed period, as ‘xenophobia’ or ‘nativism’ were not addressed directly. However, in May 2018, the migration authority was officially “rejecting threats against Venezuelan citizens in Colombia” (Migración 2018c), representing a first step towards recognizing an increasing problem. The issue remained a secondary item on the agenda during the analyzed period, though, to be treated mostly locally (Rodríguez and Robayo 2019, 14).

During his last week in office by August 2018, Santos announced the immediate *regularization* of 440,000 Venezuelans who, according to the RAMV conducted a couple of months earlier, lived unauthorized in Colombia (Presidencia 2018b) and was the corollary to one of his last speeches days before:

“Maduro’s policy has elicited the exodus of thousands of Venezuelan citizens and the disintegration of their families. The Venezuelan government has an expulsion policy today against its citizens: the fewer people live in the country, the easier it is to distribute whatever little is still in place. We, the rest of the region’s countries, are working together to reach out to this population, which was forced to abandon their country –A *migration*

*without any precedent in world history. [...] It will soon lead to one million Venezuelans living in Colombia*" (Migración 2018e, emphasis added).

The triad control-authority-generosity was immanent. In this case, regularization appeared as a technology of control, exerted by an increasingly legitimate authority, that acts as the speaker against a rogue enemy and the generous benefactor of a dispossessed population. Actions over migration from Venezuela were intrinsically related to political bets interwoven into an elaborate scaffolding, which involved getting the approval of a multi-faceted audience that included Colombian citizens and local authorities. It served as a vehicle for communicating with South American governments, powers such as the United States, multilateral and civil society organizations, and, of course, the Venezuelan government and its opposition. The aim was to secure that the premise of generosity was sufficiently adhesive to convince the audiences that humanitarianism was preferred. Although constant, underlying motivations such as keeping migrants at bay through surveillance and disciplining were less explicit in this picture.

## The drivers of generosity

Generosity in Colombian official discourse towards migration from Venezuela is the product of a complex backdrop of power moves, interests, and calculations, responding to pragmatism's primacy over ideology. Humanitarianism, a discursive shield over policy since 2015 that intensified during the last year of Santos's administration, served as a tool for political legitimation on different levels. Yet, it was only fixed as a permanent and leading feature once a disciplinary control and policing strategy over migrants had been put in place. Interestingly, the moral setting on which this strategy was based justified the exclusion of migrants' agencies' from the general political debate. They were discursively turned into vulnerable but also potentially dangerous subjects of policies. Institutions in place thereby affirmed their authority over designing schemas of governmental control. The main drivers behind this behavior lead us to evaluate several key moments of this process.

Initially, the mass return of Colombians living at the Venezuelan side of the border seems to have propelled an imaginary among authorities, in which migration and mobility were pictured as utterly precarized. For instance, images of the 2015 border crisis depicting hundreds of women, men, and children, crossing the bordering Táchira river on foot impacted how the initial policy was formulated. It was conceived as an emergency humanitarian measure. In time, as migration intensified, the initial picture did not change significantly over time.

It served to politicize the phenomenon as an emergency characterized by the movement of a precarious mob.

Besides, once the border was reopened from the Venezuelan side in 2016 and mobility kept rising, Colombian bureaucrats were not ready to define absolute political responsibilities. They preferred not to publicly charge their counterpart for emerging mass mobility, as they depended on Venezuelan mediation in the ongoing negotiations with the FARC. Meanwhile, domestic management was assigned to MIGCOL, an entity that had only served as a border enforcement authority, without a legal mandate to create or modify policies. This lack of expertise, also influenced by the country's previous focus on its internal conflict, prioritized security-oriented measures in migration management. The visible consequence was boosting irregularization, differentiating the new and incoming 'unruly mob' of migrants, and organizing its control and policing. Yet, the moral setting and the material inability in place constituted limitations for exerting this control in a more open, direct manner. These elements confirm the lack of definitive evidence to explain this move as the extension of an ideological or dogmatic course of action founded in sheer humanitarianism.

Previous institutional constraints also explain the official discourse. For instance, a specific human mobility system had been in place over the Colombian-Venezuelan borderzone, where states' control had been historically absent (Márquez 2019). Dwellers had developed a somehow autonomous stable existence that included a dense network of exchanges. However, the 2015 border closing implied the irruption of national institutions in many spaces throughout this setting. Among others, they were forced to exert their presence and show their ability to control the border. Yet, both sides' lack of capacity over the 2,200km-long physical border led them to focus their restrictive action on official crossing points. Meanwhile, the rest of the territory remained virtually ungoverned. This situation presented an opportunity for armed political and criminal structures active in the zone to include human trafficking and migrant smuggling in their portfolios, as the demand for mobility continued despite the new schema of control in place (Fundación Pares 2020, 6).

Hence, keeping the border closed implied, in particular, a renewed effort for control, the disruption of the economic dynamic that had previously nourished the border zone's stability, and boosting criminal action. Reopening meant allowing mass mobility into the country due to turmoil in Venezuela. Both were sub-optimal options. The latter choice was privileged, in any case. Thus, later stylized into the politics of generosity, the humanitarian element emerged as a discursive category to justify the situation before domestic audiences. Indeed, Colombian institutions needed to make the reception of a massive population

acceptable for social sectors that could perceive it as an administrative flaw. They thus appealed to the public's generosity. The bid was aimed at touching the moral ground of citizens. However, irregularization emerged as the complementary, embedded strategy for policing. It offered a technique for directly governing and disciplining both newcomers and local populations. Once the schema was in place, generosity was added as the leading official discourse's primary framing.

Generosity also became useful for political action abroad. It underpinned the Colombian quest for financial aid, necessary to maintain a resource-intensive reception policy. Concurrently, the end of Colombian dependency on the Venezuelan regime for dealing with domestic interests around 2016 marked a significant change. From then on, Maduro's government was presented as the structural cause behind migration. Building this antagonism became thus central in the consolidation of the strategy. As a moral value embedded in the definition of good and evil, Colombian generosity was progressively presented as the answer for an amoral action enacted by the Venezuelan counterpart. Once the process was in place, generosity also gave Colombia's status-seeking an opportunity in the regional context.

Lastly, the strategy perceived in the discourse promoted an artificial dichotomy between security and dispossession over concerned individuals. The palpable consequence of enforcing this essentialized version of reality is that migrant struggles, or the many ways migrants exert their political agency in a context of extended control and subjectivization, are obviated from the picture (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 80-81). During the analyzed period, authorities did not seem to promote a dialogue in that sense. They were mostly interested in migrants' subjection as the preferred technology for their governmentality.

## Conclusion

This article analyzed how migration from Venezuela emerged in Colombian official discourse between 2015 and 2018. It started by commenting on how the context analysis of the information was conducted and why it was centered on observing official discourse. It then moved on to explain the underpinnings of the discourse based on generosity. It unpacked how this resulted from a pragmatic move aimed at the consolidation of the governmentality of large-scale mobility as an unprecedented phenomenon in the country. Besides, it explored how its emergence was embedded with an imaginary around mass migration depicting it as an utterly precarized phenomenon. Furthermore, it was clarified how irregularization was a strategic practice conducted as human mobility turned into an essential topic on the country's political agenda by recalling Nyers's, Squire's, and Tazzioli's

conceptual contributions. Finally, it was identified how generosity, a moral category extended from a discursive effort based on humanitarian grounds, was put at the center of political action over the government of migration in Colombia.

One primary empirical concern emerged from the analysis. An artificial dichotomy between security and dispossession stemming from the discourse put forward between 2015 and 2018 might limit a political solution's scope. Under that premise, policy and analysis tend to deny migrants' political agencies a common source of conflict in contemporary human mobility settings. Moreover, while official postures towards migration from Venezuela continue to foster the perception of these realities as the process is still ongoing, further investigation is needed to bridge the existing gaps between official expectations and individuals' actions. This goal can be achieved by analyzing the complex relations between official discourses and migrant struggles issued from co-opted agencies.

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