Moving Towards Europe
Diverse Trajectories and Multidimensional Drivers of Migration across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic
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Chapter 12  The continued Venezuelan exodus

Abstract: Venezuela is distinctively marked by its current humanitarian crisis, as political, economic and social complications have resulted in the state’s deteriorating democratic institutions and crippled economic and productive capacities, leading to six million displaced. Historically receiving immigration from Europe and Spain, Venezuela transitioned to a country of emigration in the 1980s in light of declining oil prices and financial crisis. The rise of the Chávez government in 1999 triggered further outmigration. At this point, significant Venezuelan migration to Europe and Spain began, largely regular and facilitated by economic, professional and cultural capital, until another 2013 oil crisis shifted this profile. Migration demographics became increasingly heterogeneous in 2015 and 2016 under the contested Maduro government and with snowballing humanitarian crisis. Most Venezuelan migration is regional, with Colombia and Brazil serving as choices due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border ties, along with Peru, Ecuador and Chile. However, in the case of emigration to Europe, family reunification or asylum claims can be a means to regular migration, and Spain has offered some targeted humanitarian protection regimes. At the same time, the persisting humanitarian crisis has invited more restrictive policies in neighbouring countries, and often leads to irregular migration both within the Latin American region and further abroad.

Keywords: humanitarian crisis | political instability | Europe historical ties | humanitarian protection corridors | non-linear trajectories

Migration to, within and from Venezuela, a federal presidential republic with a population of almost 28.5 million as of 2020 (UN Population Division 2020), is primarily understood in light of an ongoing humanitarian crisis and political repression, precipitated by overall predisposing factors including deteriorating economic, political and security conditions. Beginning with the 1998 election of President Hugo Chávez, academic, political and human rights spheres have noted massive emigration trends, with even further exacerbation in the ongoing exodus identified as starting in 2015 and 2016, under the contested government of President Nicolás Maduro (Edson Louidor 2018). Venezuela’s current political, economic, and social crisis has garnered international attention, and the country is cited as one of the global leaders in terms of refugees and displaced (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020).
For the most part, in these most recent migratory movements, Venezuelans move to neighbouring countries or the general Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, with the largest concentration specifically residing in Colombia, followed by the countries of Ecuador, Peru and Chile, and key extra-regional destinations include the United States and Spain (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada 2020). The Platform for Interregional Coordination of Migrants and Refugees estimates that currently there are 5.9 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees globally (R4V 2021), with 4.8 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela remaining in Latin America and the Caribbean. Colombia hosts 1.7 million, Peru 1.3 million, Ecuador 482,900, Chile 448,100 and Brazil 261,400. At the international level, countries that experience significant Venezuelan migration include the United States with 465,200 nationals, Spain with 415,000 and Italy with 59,400. Experts cite the state’s political and economic failure, alongside added Covid-19 economic hardship including food, medicine and medical supply shortages, when claiming that the current Venezuelan emigration represents an unprecedented migration crisis in the region, particularly given the relatively short period of time in which it has taken place, and the significant inter- and intra-regional displacements.

Within this framework, this chapter explores, firstly, the history of the immigration and emigration phenomenon in the country, focusing on the economic, political and social context. Secondly, it provides an overview of the main trends in migration and asylum flows to the European Union in the last ten years, with a special emphasis on the situation regarding beneficiaries of international protection. Finally, the chapter presents an outline of the overall origin context experienced by Venezuelan migrants informing their decisions to leave, before offering brief concluding thoughts.

12.1 Historical context of Venezuela’s immigration and emigration

Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuela has served as a significant country of immigration from Europe, primarily for Spanish migrants, as well as receiving immigration from neighbouring countries in the region. Post-war immigration from Europe to Venezuela was prevalent, not only due to Spanish colonial ties, but also given a refugee programme that encouraged migrants from others Southern European countries, including Portugal and Italy (Huhn 2020). In this framework, the Venezuelan government sent three post-1945 missions to France, Italy and Germany, in order to recruit specific migrant profiles, including agricultural and domestic workers (ibid.). Furthermore, oil reserves discovered in the
1920s led to Venezuela’s economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with accompanying immigration continuing from Europe. Exceptionally high economic growth rates due to the international price of oil are cited as driving this immigration, which also drew from the greater LAC region (Sassen-Koob 1979).

However, a decline in oil prices in the 1980s and ensuing financial crisis after Black Friday, among other factors, caused economic and political instability in the country. This occurred in parallel with wider social, political and economic contextual crises in LAC. At this point, Venezuela began transforming into a country of emigration, with Spain as the most relevant European receiving country. It is argued that initial Venezuelan emigration in the 1990s was motivated by a desire to avoid the loss of economic, political and social status. Chávez’s socialist government established from 1999 onwards coincided with further emigration, and was characterised by a leftist ideology, nationalisation and a resistance to United States hegemony until 2013. While the literature and data reflect a majority of women as compared to men among Venezuelan migrants to Europe, it is notable that these patterns were and continue to be comparatively less feminised than those drawing from other countries in the LAC region (Dekocker 2018).

Emigration has been rising over the past two decades. In particular, since 2016, it has been identified as both asylum-related, given the claims relating to political upheaval, as well as economically motivated, with many leaving in search of basic rights (access to health, food, work) given the state’s collapse. Initially, a great number of migrants were considered highly educated and skilled, drawing from the upper and middle class, with their absence further contributing to the country’s economic troubles (Garcia Zea 2020). However, the snowballing humanitarian crisis has been contributing to a shift in this profile (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019). Whether Venezuelans are afforded refugee status largely often depends on the migration policies and practices of each receiving country.

As mentioned, the majority of Venezuelans emigrate to neighbouring countries, with Colombia and Brazil serving as choices due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border ties, and Peru, Ecuador and Chile serving as further regional destinations (UN Population Division 2020). Peru, in particular, was considered accommodating in its refugee policies at the start of the Venezuelan crisis, and continues to be perceived as offering the best employment opportunities in the region (Morales and Pierola 2020; Doocy et al. 2019). It is accessible by foot through transit via Colombia, as is Ecuador, which serves as both a transit and destination country for Venezuelan migrants. In any case, the Peruvian government recently announced it would reopen a dialogue between Peru and
Venezuela, possibly signalling border closure, tightening immigration policies or an increase in deportations.

While the surrounding region (i.e., LAC states) has a history of openness to humanitarian protection and migration, most countries in the region are un-equipped to meet Venezuela’s asylum needs (Staedicke 2018). Although when the crisis began these countries offered a more or less ‘open door’ approach to Venezuelan migrants, and several countries established reception programmes, policies are becoming more restrictive (Wallace and Mortley 2021). According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of December 2020, 851,119 Venezuelans are subject to pending asylum applications, and only 171,127 refugees have received recognition (UNHCR 2021b). Up until 2021, the majority of Venezuelan refugees have been recognised in in Spain (75,640), Brazil (46,675), the United States (17,292), Mexico (13,014) and Canada (3,524) (UNHCR 2022). Regional states such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile account for about 58 per cent of applications, but the process of status recognition is slow (R4V 2021). Lack of resources and infrastructure in humanitarian response is punctuated by bureaucratic roadblocks and disjointed regional coordination on migration governance, in addition to insufficient response from the Venezuelan government itself (Camilleri and Hampson 2018).

In light of involuntary migration patterns, those Venezuelans who cross into bordering LAC states can be subjected to human and sex trafficking (John 2019). Indeed, individuals participating in the most recent migration from Venezuela often do not have a valid passport, and thus could not initiate visa processes even if these were less restrictive (*ibid.*). At the same time, the current humanitarian crisis and new visa restrictions often lead to irregular migration both within the LAC region and further abroad.

Apart from LAC, the United States is historically and increasingly a main destination as well. While studies estimate that the Venezuelan population in the United States is not fully accounted for, as of 2018 they were the fifth largest immigrant group from South America, with a median age of 38 and higher levels of education as compared with foreign and US-born adults (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019; Gallardo and Batalova 2020).

Focusing on Europe, and particularly Spain, Venezuelan migration substantially began during the period from Chávez taking power in 1998 until roughly 2013; the Venezuelan migrant profile largely reflected regular status. Given that Venezuelan migrants often could claim Spanish descendence thanks to colonial ties or due to post-World War II Spanish emigration to Venezuela, those with Spanish parents or grandparents benefitted from an allowance for dual nationality (Spanish and EU); this policy lasted until 2013. This, along with the
economic, professional and cultural capital, facilitated regular migration and integration. Moreover, Venezuelans migrating to Spain also consisted of young professionals seeking to complete graduate degrees and enter the labour market, usually individually, with an increase in student visa applications and renewals from 2012 to 2015 (Dekocker 2018).

Indeed, it should be emphasised that the Venezuela-to-Europe migration profile is distinct from the profile migrating to the LAC region. On the one hand, second- or third-generation migrants and binational families have been able to nationalise in European countries like Spain, Portugal and Italy. On the other hand, there is an important number of Venezuelan migrants who arrive in the EU in the framework of a family reunification process. Finally, the costs and regulations involved in transatlantic journeys from Venezuela have meant that migrants with valid passports and with mid-high to high socioeconomic and educational profiles tend to enter as tourists, and then request international protection from an EU member state once they are settled.

However, the profile of regular migration to Europe has slightly altered, particularly in parallel with another decline in oil prices between 2013 and 2016 that contributed to a Venezuelan economic crisis operating in tandem with political instability and corruption (Van Praag 2019). For the ten years under study here (2009–20), Eurostat data on asylum applications in conjunction with Spanish municipal registration help to flesh out recent trends in Venezuelan migration to Europe. These data sources in particular are chosen because the majority of Venezuelan migration to Europe is to and through Spain, via air route to the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid, where Venezuelans arrive after often having departed from a transit country, such as Colombia.

12.2 Recent trends in EU-bound migration from Venezuela: 2010–2019

In examining trends at the EU level over the course of the years 2010 to 2019, Eurostat data on Venezuelan migration indicate that this population most frequently chose Spain as a destination country (Figure 12.1). While migration numbers dip in the years 2012 and 2013, they rise from 2014 forward and significantly increase beginning in 2017. In particular, in the year 2017, 31,598 Venezuelans migrated to Spain, followed by 47,147 in 2018 and 58,054 in 2019; the latter figure reflects nine times the amount of migrants as compared to 2010. Venezuelan migration clearly becomes a more significant portion of overall immigration when it peaks in 2019, as Venezuelan migration to Spain makes up 4 per cent of all immigration from the Community of Latin American and
Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010, 9 per cent in 2015 and 52 per cent in 2019. In the years 2010 to 2019, for the Spanish case, the average male versus female gender makeup of recorded migration is 42.81 per cent versus 57.18 per cent. This general division remains similar to the average over the years, without any significant variation.

Figure 12.1: Immigration to top EU country destinations by individuals with Venezuelan citizenship, 2010–2019
Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021b).

However, Spain is not the only destination country. Other EU members received Venezuelan migration over the ten-year period, notably Italy, followed far behind by the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria. While not receiving nearly as many Venezuelan nationals as Spain, Italy receives significantly more Venezuelans as compared with the other three countries. It also reflects the same dip in numbers in 2012 and 2013, as well as a substantial increase beginning from 2017 onwards. The percentage of women versus men also remains consistent in Italy over this period, with an average of 37.04 per cent males and 62.96 per cent females over the selected period. The greatest discrepancy occurs in 2021, with a difference of 32.70 per cent males versus 67.29 per cent females.

To illustrate the significance of the Venezuelan population in Spain, the authors analysed data from the Spanish municipal registry (*censo municipal*). This census is collected annually and compiled at the national level, and
represents official state statistics on all residents, including foreign nationals. In general terms, the Spanish census data on Venezuelan nationals residing in Spain roughly corresponds to the Eurostat data patterns for immigration of individuals with Venezuelan citizenship to Spain. The breakdown ranges between a 57.08 per cent and a 58.97 per cent majority of Venezuelan women, depending on the year in the ten-year period. At the same time, the Spanish census data record slightly higher numbers in terms of Venezuelans present in Spain. This is likely because this dataset reflects a yearly count of registered residents in a given city, regardless of legal status. As an example of what is taking place in the Spanish case, Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia were selected for analysis based on their historical migrant populations and size as the largest three municipalities in Spain. Displayed in Figure 12.2 are Venezuelans registered in the communities of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia from 2009 to 2020.

As demonstrated in Figure 12.2, while the population remains fairly steady until 2012, there is a slight decrease in the numbers between 2012 and 2014. This reflects a similar trend captured in Eurostat data on immigration. Apart from this one dip over the course of the three-year period, the population steadily increases. Most notably, however, the figure shows how Venezuelan registrations begin to increase starting from 2015 onwards. By 2020, the population has quadrupled in Madrid and tripled in Barcelona.

**Figure 12.2:** Venezuelan nationals residing in Spanish cities, 2009–2020
Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on INE (2021).
Within these three cities, Venezuelans do not rank highly in the total of resident nationalities until the year 2018. In Madrid, for example, they rank between sixteenth and eighteenth in the number of foreign residents from 2009 to 2015, then rise steadily until climbing to sixth place in 2018, and remaining the fifth greatest nationality (second greatest of the CELAC countries, after Colombia) in 2019 and 2020. In Barcelona, they remain outside of the top twenty foreign national residents until 2018, where they rank fourteenth, followed by twelfth in 2019 and finally placing in the top ten behind Colombia and Honduras in 2020. They similarly remain a less significant proportion out of the overall foreign population residing in Valencia over the ten-year period, albeit finally reaching the top ten in 2019 and 2020, with Colombia as the only other CELAC country ranking above them over these years. Again, these resident registration numbers are useful in validating Eurostat information on immigration statistics.

In turning back to Eurostat data for asylum data, first-time asylum applications are again illustrative of Spain as a primary destination. In an examination of first-time asylum applications, the bulk are submitted to Spain, followed by Italy, France and Germany, with requests to Spain totalling 106,215 over the ten-year period (Figure 12.3).

![Figure 12.3: Asylum applications from Venezuela to the EU, 2010–2020](image)

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

In observing asylum trends, there is a notable application spike at the beginning of 2016, which then rises going forward. In terms of the height of requests
over the ten-year period, the year 2019 marks the greatest number of asylum applications from Venezuelans to Europe, again to Spain, Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands. These drop slightly in 2020. As can be viewed below (Table 12.1), Venezuelan asylum requests to Spain make up the majority of all Venezuelan asylum requests to the EU from 2015 onward, making up 92 per cent of Venezuelan applications to the EU in 2020. In 2020, Venezuelan applications make up 6.5 per cent of asylum requests from all nationalities to the EU.

Table 12.1: Venezuelan asylum applications to Spain and the EU, 2010–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Asylum applications to Spain</th>
<th>Total asylum applications to the EU</th>
<th>As % of total applications to the EU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>36.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>42.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>3,960</td>
<td>4,670</td>
<td>84.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>12,875</td>
<td>14,480</td>
<td>88.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>19,290</td>
<td>22,440</td>
<td>85.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>40,835</td>
<td>45,405</td>
<td>89.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>28,385</td>
<td>30,805</td>
<td>92.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>106,185</td>
<td>119,195</td>
<td>89.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

However, as briefly noted in the description of the Atlantic route, given the current situation and mass exodus from Venezuela, these applications are likely unrepresentative of a greater number of nationals that could qualify for international protection, including under human rights treaties beyond the 1951 Convention, and anti-trafficking protocols. As currently Venezuelans are exempted from a visa when travelling to Spain for a short stay (after having arrived in Spain via air through the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid), they may remain in the country and thus eventually take on irregular status.

As Figure 12.4 shows, while applications remained fairly low from 2010–15 in Spain, they begin to rise in 2015 and start to increase from 2016–19. As can be noted here, beginning in 2016, asylum applications from Venezuela surpassed all other nationalities, whereas until then they had remained equal to or less
than those from Colombia and Syria. The 2019 peak in asylum applications from Venezuela is significant, with 2020 reflecting a drop in applications, but still totalling the second greatest number in any year in the period. While asylum applications to Spain remain balanced between male and female on average over the period, 2011 is notable in that it is the year with the greatest percentage of male applicants (60 per cent), and while the gender breakdown of applications remains balanced or with a male majority from 2011–16, from 2017 onwards female applications make up a slight majority.

![Figure 12.4: Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009–2020](image)

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021a).

The asylum applications from other countries apart from Venezuela demonstrate that some of these asylum trends may be specific to Venezuelan asylum-seekers and are not reflective of asylum demand overall. For example, in 2018, as applications continue to increase dramatically in the context of the period under study, they also increase from other LAC countries like Colombia and Honduras, but Syrian and Ukrainian applications slightly decrease in the same year (Figure 12.4).
12.3 The Venezuela context in understanding the rise in asylum applications

After presenting specific migration trends in the previous section, we next focus on a general outline of the overall origin context that Venezuelans have experienced in the past years 2009–20, which largely relates to alleged political instability and accompanying economic and humanitarian crises. A starting point lies with the Chávez government, as outlined in the earlier migration and asylum profile, which already oversaw a population facing serious hardship. After former President Chávez died of cancer, his successor Nicolás Maduro took office in March of 2013 in a narrow and contested election. Since then, political unrest as well as claims of corruption, political oppression and Maduro’s illegitimacy have persisted.

While immigration to Europe slows and even slightly decreases between 2012 and 2014, the rise again in 2014 forward could be attributed to yet another fall in oil prices, further economic crisis and stringent repression of significant civil protests that took place in 2014, as the people voiced their concern over the country’s situation (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). Continued political events undoubtedly shaped migratory movements. In particular, in December of 2015, the opposition party won control of the legislature, in the first parliamentary election to take place since Chávez’s death, and the first time that the ruling party lost since 1999. However, Venezuela’s Supreme Court, stacked with Maduro government loyalists, stripped the legislature of its powers and declared the opposition win fraudulent, denying efforts throughout 2016 to hold a referendum to recall Maduro’s government. In July 2017, the Supreme Court ordered the takeover of three leading opposition parties, appointing Maduro government supporters to the National Electoral Council. In the same year, Maduro government supporters won two-thirds of the National Assembly seats, in an election boycotted by the majority of opposition and all institutions, except for the legislative branch. After another contested re-election of Maduro in May 2018, Juan Guaidó, National Assembly president, declared himself interim President of Venezuela in January 2019, bringing the country to a political impasse (Singer 2020). Once again, in July of 2020, ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for December, the Supreme Court ordered the ‘restructuring’ of three leading political opposition parties (those opposing Maduro) (Moleiro 2020). Several neighbouring regional and wider international governments declared the elections were neither free nor fair. International support is divided, and Maduro continues to attend CELAC summits, including the Sixth CELAC Summit of the Heads of State and Government in September 2021 in Mexico.
In looking at the dramatic increase in immigration from 2017 forward, as well as the asylum spike from 2016 on, these political events help to contextualise the political instability faced by Venezuelans. In addition to the 2014 protests, denial of the 2016 presidential recall referendum, and the convocation of the National Assembly in 2017, unrest fomented to lead to further protests in 2017 that resulted in 165 deaths (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). As protests continue, it is worth noting how a recent 2021 UNHCR report indicates that security operations and suppression of protests particularly resulted in the deaths of young men and boys from marginalised neighbourhoods (UNHCR 2021a).

Related to political instability is the overall insecurity generated by compounded crises, and what is considered the political and economic failure of the Venezuelan state. As of 2020, the Venezuelan Observatory for Violence estimated that Venezuela remained the most violent country in the region and one of the most violent in the world, with 11,891 violent deaths at a rate of 45.6 for every 100,000 inhabitants (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia 2020). Criminal groups and drug traffickers also destabilise any state security authority and contribute to the general insecurity as well as the vulnerability of the overall Venezuelan population (Edson Louidor 2018). There is argued to be an increasing complicity between these criminal groups and the National Guard, as well (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018).

In fact, the human rights situation in terms of political oppression may serve as a driver for the more privileged of Venezuela’s population, including those who are able to migrate to Europe. There have been reports of ongoing political oppression, confirmed by human rights watchdogs (HRW 2021). The number of political prisoners has allegedly skyrocketed, with many jailed without access to due process (Biderbost and Nuñez 2019). Furthermore, media censorship also takes place alongside the widespread corruption (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018).

As of 2019, Venezuela was the OPEC member with the largest proven crude oil reserves (OPEC 2020). However, its economy has been described as in collapse. Since the 2014 oil crisis, the government has defaulted on foreign debt, the productive sector has been crippled by exchange and price control policies, the oil industry is collapsing and hyperinflation has eliminated Venezuelans’ purchasing power (García Durán and Cuevas 2018). An illustrative example of the dire situation includes how in 2017, the average Venezuelan lost 10 kg due to lack of food (ibid.). According to the National Survey on Living Conditions in 2021, 94.5 per cent of Venezuelans are in a situation of poverty, and of these 76.6 per cent are in extreme poverty (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello 2021). The data also indicate that only 5.8 per cent are not experiencing food insecurity (ibid.). Minimum wage increase decrees by the government also affected the economic
situation, with the last increase of 300 per cent made official in January of 2019 (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 168).

In relation to the pandemic, most recently, the economic overview produced by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 2020 ranked the drop in Venezuela’s GDP as the greatest in the region, three times greater than the next countries on the list including Peru, Panama and Argentina (ECLAC 2020). In addition to the economic duress, even before the Covid-19 pandemic the health system could be described as collapsed, with an increase in maternal and child mortality, diphtheria and malaria outbreaks, those with chronic diseases unable to access treatment, deterioration in health infrastructure and shortage of medicine, medical supplies and surgical equipment, as well as a large number of medical personnel having migrated in search of improved conditions (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 168).

Within this context, the volume of asylum applications in 2019 is perhaps due to the deepening crisis, and the subsequent drop in 2020 likely due to the Covid-19-induced national border closures in Spain as well as restrictions on entry affecting the entire EU, and thus shutdown of the principal point of entry for the Atlantic air route. In fact, the 2020 numbers remain high in light of the period of time the Spanish and EU borders remained closed in 2020.

Apart from the situation at home, currently policies within the region and among other LAC states might also influence Venezuelans’ decisions to ultimately choose Europe. Again, it is argued that interregional agreements including Mercosur (the Southern Common Market) boast some of the most human-rights-compatible migration policies globally, and many countries in the region interpret the definition of refugee broadly, comparatively speaking (Lavenex 2019). Despite the humanitarian openness of its neighbours, however, in practice applications for international protection are not largely or consistently granted, with the exception of Mexico (Gandini et al. 2020). Moreover, it should be noted that while some countries like Argentina and Uruguay grant easier access to residency due to the Mercosur agreement, other states listed earlier (Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and Peru) serve as main destination countries in the region (ibid.). For this reason, both the intraregional migration dynamics and any relation to migration to Europe must be considered in light of factors including family ties, lack of resources, socio-economic conditions and circumstances of extreme vulnerability as well.

Moreover, the extended nature of the Venezuelan crisis is a challenge. For example, neighbouring Ecuador expanded its policy temporarily between 2009 and 2010 to absorb Colombian asylum-seekers in a regularisation of 30,000 Colombian nationals. However, these policies have not been extended to the
ongoing applications of Venezuelans (Gandini et al. 2020). Another example includes how in 2019, 10,479 Venezuelans sought asylum in bordering Colombia, with only 145 of these accepted as of 2020 (Ruiz del Río and Hoyos Bula 2020). At this same time, a regularisation process has been announced in September of 2021 that could regularise 450,000 Venezuelans (UNHCR 2021a).

As mentioned, Colombia is the main destination country and it also serves as a key transit country, as it shares a difficult-to-control border of approximately 2,219 kilometres with Venezuela, receiving around 30 per cent of Venezuelan migration, as well as serving as a transit country for 90 per cent of the Venezuelan population that migrate to another country (Ramos et al. 2019). This is despite ruptures in diplomatic relations and periodic border closures between the two countries, which often influence the choice of irregular passages across the border (ibid.). Moreover, Venezuelans may repeatedly cross the border in seeking access to food or medical supplies. The border areas can be insecure, and spaces where criminal organisations operate and control irregular routes, in the absence of institutional stability, with populations made invisible and revictimised at these borders (ibid.). Upon leaving Colombia, another precarious route that Venezuelans (along with other nationalities) can embark on towards the United States and Canada goes through the Darien jungle area of Panama, where Colombian National Police and Interpol estimate the migrant trafficking business earns one million US dollars weekly (El Espectador 2021).

As such, a demographic profile at the border is useful in observing self-described drivers for Venezuelans. A study conducted in 2018 surveying almost 15,000 Venezuelans arriving in Colombia explains that motivations to emigrate include insecurity, finding a better livelihood or employment and supporting their family via remittances; it argues that the profile of those emigrating represents a significant loss of economically active populations in Venezuela (Mazuera-Arias et al. 2020: 176). At the same time, as referenced earlier, it should be emphasised that the uptick in migration from Venezuela particularly beginning in 2016 has meant a diversification of the migratory profiles. There are families with children, unaccompanied minors and elderly people with chronic diseases, among other vulnerable populations, all forming part of the mass migration (Ramos et al. 2019).

12.4 European (Spanish) migration policies and a shift in migration profiles

Given these considerations to contextualise the latest Venezuelan emigration from the perspective of origin, including the rise in asylum applications
beginning in 2015 and increasing from 2016 onwards, policies in Europe and specifically Spain help to illustrate recent patterns as well. Firstly, again, Spain allows for regularisation based on descendance, which may serve as a draw, and Portugal and Italy have similar policies (Dekocker 2018). However, with the deepening crisis in Venezuela, young migrants who did not meet the requirements for double nationality also began to arrive (ibid.). From 2013 onwards, it became more difficult to arrive to Spain with a student visa, and as previously noted, the 2016 surge in humanitarian applications changed the migration and asylum profile up until that point (ibid.).

In Spain, while the majority of Venezuelans request asylum after arriving, some already request it at the border at the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid (Dekocker 2018). Once again, in this sense, the exceptional nature and magnitude of the Venezuelan crisis begets varying and perhaps reactionary asylum policies. For example, in 2018, a Spanish Commission on Refugees (Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado, CEAR) report explained that only 65 per cent of all asylum petitions for international protection were granted in the year 2017, below the EU average and also below the year before in Spain (CEAR 2020: 68–69). Of those, 99 per cent of Venezuelans were rejected. The Spanish Ministry of the Interior, overwhelmed with asylum applications, announced in February 2019 that it would issue temporary residence to Venezuelans based on ‘humanitarian reasons’. As a result, in the year 2019, out of the 40,906 Venezuelans applying for asylum, 39,667 were issued these temporary permits and only 48 received official refugee status (ibid.). The 2019 increase in asylum applications over the previous observed trends could be partially accounted for by this 2019 policy.

Given the irregular nature of current mobility patterns and the very recent high volume, which still remain to be exhaustively analysed and understood, several qualitative studies conducted with Venezuelan migrants also help to shed light on the drivers of migration to Europe. Historical migration from Venezuela and even up through the decade under study may have encompassed students and skilled labour, including migrants with economic, professional and cultural capital as mentioned earlier. However, the profile has become more heterogeneous with the mass exodus, with populations accessing Spain and Europe via asylum seeking and immigration regimes as well as irregular channels.

This changing profile could explain gender variation in recent trends, and shifting dynamics in women’s and family migration. Until recently, migration from Venezuela had not reflected the same degree of feminisation as in other LAC countries; this could be attributed to the fact that rather than migrating as part of global care chains, Venezuelan migration included elite flight and
skilled workers with a more balanced gender profile. However, the most recent years (from 2016 onwards) have demonstrated a slight female majority in migration and asylum applicants. This may be a result of the ‘en masse’, collective nature of current flight: a study using International Organisation for Migration data presents a regional profile of Venezuelan migrants and refugees traveling through and to a selection of American and Caribbean countries during 2019, and reports that the vast majority travelled with family members. This family migration perhaps explains the trend whereby both Venezuelan immigration to Spain and asylum seekers in Spain reflect higher percentages of females in the second half of the period under study, versus the first half (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada 2020).

Moreover, while the literature notes that Venezuelan migration is not exclusive to those with Spanish heritage, this still factors into the current Venezuelan migration to Spain and Europe. Thus, those Venezuelans who reach Europe in the current prolonged crisis may diverge from the more vulnerable migrant profiles that remain in the surrounding region or nations bordering Venezuela, for example (Gandini et al. 2020). By way of example, a recent 2019 study notes how second- and third-generation Spanish women (born in Venezuela) are ‘returning’ for work. The majority did not have children in Spain and had family or friend networks in Spain already, which allowed for their integration, but it was not always easy to find work (even with Spanish nationality) (Rodicio-García and Sarceda-Gorgoso 2019: 13).

**12.5 Concluding observations**

In summary, decades of political, economic and social complications have resulted in a compromise of Venezuela’s democratic system and deterioration of the country’s institutional, economic and productive capacities. Gathering official information related to these considerations has been difficult, as the Venezuelan government stopped producing official reports and data around the year 2013. Ultimately it is clear that a humanitarian crisis has remained ongoing, with general food and medicine shortages, the collapse of basic services and lack of access to electricity, drinking water, the internet, transport, education and health services (PROVEA 2021). This heavily influences trends in the period under study. However, Venezuelan migration to Europe reflects a complex and interconnected history and trajectory.

Indeed, until recently, Venezuelan flows to Europe were composed of more elite populations and reflected a very particular historical context and relationship with Spanish society (Dekocker 2018). However, in light of the ongoing crisis,
the migration profile has become more heterogeneous, and notably non-linear; Venezuelans may transit through and stay for long periods of time in countries within the LAC region before moving on to Spain. These transit migrants mainly seek economic resources and stability (obtaining savings) before continuing their journey. Although the majority of displaced Venezuelans remain within the surrounding region, reduced travel costs and a greater variety of available routes, as well as increasingly established personal networks in Spain, can facilitate the journey to Europe (Palma 2015).

Moreover, Spain has recently demonstrated openness to facilitating regular migration pathways or upholding humanitarian protection corridors in the case of Venezuela specifically, in that it issued special ‘humanitarian protection’ visas in 2020 to around 40,000 Venezuelans. However, LAC states have tended to become more restrictive in policies towards displaced Venezuelans, particularly as survival-driven and forced migration promises to continue. In fact, this new context has forced many Venezuelan migrants to return to their country of origin given the economic and social adversities, mainly provoked by pandemic crisis, and the impossibility of starting an accommodation process in the host country (Sánchez-Montijano 2022). It remains to be seen whether national, regional, intergovernmental and trans-governmental policies will achieve consistency in upholding human rights guarantees and international protection commitments. In particular, EU member states’ asylum and humanitarian protection recognition rates will be key in determining Venezuelans’ regular pathways to Europe and Spain, as flows remain likely to continue.

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