



VENEZUELAN MIGRATION - A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COLOMBIA

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While Colombians were crossing the border over a period of 30 years, Venezuelans have been doing so over just three, and on a massive scale in the last year. The Universidad del Rosario's Venezuela Observatory, a unique project in Latin America, analyzes the situation.

By the end of 2019, between two and four million Venezuelans will have left their country, many of them most probably bound for Colombia. The history of fraternity between the two nations, and their geographical proximity, offers these migrants hope of a new life. This number is more or less equal to the population of Cali, and double that of Barranquilla, if it should reach four million. And that is the calculation of Ronal Rodríguez, Venezuela Observatory researcher, political scientist, internationalist, and holder of a Master's Degree in Political Science. For the past 14 years he has been studying the economic, social and, of course, the political situation in our neighbouring country.

In 2004, the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations of the Universidad del Rosario decided to set up the Venezuela Observatory, a unique group in its discipline in Colombia and Latin America, its aim being to analyze the different phenomena presented by this country. Rodríguez is one of its researchers and its spokesperson, in other words the person charged with getting across the outcomes of the Observatory's many different analyses.

"The Observatory came into being in 2004, but it had previously undertaken a project galvanized by the former Colom-

bian president Alfonso López Michelsen—who always underlined the importance of relations with Venezuela—and the then dean of Political Science, Eduardo Barajas, who delegated to Professors Francesca Ramos and Enrique Serrano. The period spans from 1998, during Hugo Chávez's first election campaign, up to the recall referendum of 2004," comments Rodríguez.

The functions of the Observatory, which is directed by Professor Ramoz, are to carry out academic research into the political system, social policies, and bilateral relations, among other subjects, and to communicate the resulting knowledge so that the Colombian government and other national and international bodies have sufficient elements upon which to base their judgements and decisions.

"We have interaction with state agencies and different organizations. They ask us for advice, recommendations, and our perception of certain issues. We are a constant source of consultation. Sometimes we are listened



← Colombia hasn't got the migratory experience the rest of Latin America has had. For this reason we must get ready, and in this task it is important to understand that Venezuelan migration means development in the medium term, comments Ronal Rodríguez, researcher with the Venezuela Observatory.

to, at others we are not, but that is all part of the dynamic," explains the professor.

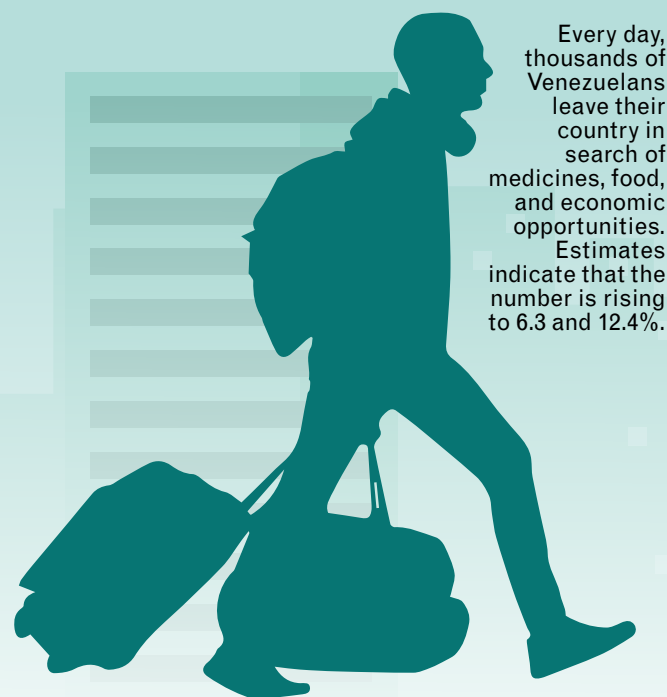
At the current moment, and for obvious reasons, the migration of Venezuelans to Colombia is the principal analysis focus for the Observatory. In terms of research, the phenomenon overwhelmed the Colombian state and even the Observatory itself, given that just four years back a migration crisis of this size was not foreseen by anyone nor is it envisaged for the future.

"A comparison of Colombian migration to Venezuela with the migratory process from Venezuela to Colombia brought home to us the size of this phenomenon. While Venezuelans received Colombians for over three decades, we have received Venezuelans for less than three years. Just the time aspect makes them a completely different phenomena. The Venezuelan migration is much more precipitous," the researcher points out.

According to this center's analysis, in the 70s and 80s Colombians crossed the frontier at a gradual and staggered rate, their intention being to enjoy the economic conditions in a Venezuela boosted by oil revenues. In the 90s, they left Colombia because of the armed conflict, though also in progressive fashion and without making waves in a country that was still enjoying economic growth. And at the start of the 2000s (between 2003 and 2004) they did so encouraged by the benefits of a government that stimulated migration to boost its election fortunes.

"Colombians of scarcer resources saw in Chavez a president offering them legalization and a social package, thus giving them sufficient incentive to emigrate. In fact, the instrumentalization of our compatriots' migration may be one of the elements behind Chávez

A PHENOMENON ON A GRAND SCALE



Every day, thousands of Venezuelans leave their country in search of medicines, food, and economic opportunities. Estimates indicate that the number is rising to 6.3 and 12.4%.

lasting as president after the 2004 recall referendum," outlines Professor Rodríguez.

In this respect, the migration of Colombians was not a mass event as is now happening with Venezuelans, nor did it have a 'prevalent' destination. According to the researcher's calculations, in a process taking place over more or less five decades, around five million people left Colombia to different parts of the world, with significant peaks at the end of the 1990s. Conversely, Venezuela is seeing the exodus of more than ten percent of its population in a fifth of the time taken by migrating Colombians, and in greater quantities in the last year. Furthermore, their destinations are nearby countries, but in first place Colombia.

RISING NUMBERS, AND NOT ALL ARE VENEZUELAN

Professor Rodríguez points out other elements appearing in Venezuela's migration phenomenon, ones that must be carefully analyzed by Colombian society and its government: an increase will occur in a short time, and among those arriving will be Colombians or the children of Colombians.

"The family nucleus used to remain in the country while a member migrated and sent funds back to help; now entire fa-

Official data from Migración Colombia place Venezuelan migration at 1.3% of the Colombian population. But to go by current estimations, the figure would be 3% of the population.

ESTIMATIONS OF VENEZUELAN IN COLOMBIA AS PART OF THIS MIGRATORY FLOW VARY BETWEEN ONE AND 1.5 MILLION.

620,000
Migrants in Italy

765,000
Migrants in Colombia

In Italy, a nation dealing with migration from Africa, the migrant population is around 620,000 people. Colombia has already topped this figure according to official counts: 765,000 in April, 2018.

"MANY OF THE RELATIONS EMERGING DUE TO VENEZUELAN MIGRATION WILL MAKE OUR FUTURE RELATIONS VERY DIFFERENT. WE COLOMBIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CLOSED OFF, SET APART BY OUR ARMED CONFLICT, AND THAT MEANT WE HAD NO DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD. NOW THAT THE CONFLICT IS BEGINNING TO DISAPPEAR AND MIGRATION IS ARRIVING, WE FACE A BIG CHALLENGE, BUT ONE THAT IS ALSO A HUGE OPPORTUNITY."

milies are getting ready to leave, and everything suggests they will head for Colombia," he says.

In April this year, 765,000 Venezuelans went through the registration office at some point, while the December 2017 figure was 550,000, not including those who entered the country irregularly nor returning Colombians or Colombian-Venezuelans.

Data from the National Civil Registry show that between 2010 and March 2018, 113,588 children of Colombian mothers or fathers were registered in consulates in Venezuela, with 26,420 in 2017 alone.

"We Colombians made up an important group in Venezuela and influenced society, so for this reason we make up the strongest support network for Venezuelans. We must also explain that many of those coming back are Colombians. In the 2011 census in Venezuela, approximately 720,000 Colombians

showed up, but these have partners and had children so we can say that this number is two or three times higher, and the Venezuelan government even mentioned a figure of five million Colombians living in Venezuela," the researcher outlines.

This means a good many Venezuelans are 'discovering' that they are Colombian and are now requesting their nationality, so conationals who have never lived in Colombia will begin to do this. "For them, and in general for Venezuelan migrants, state policies need to be created. This is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is not going to be sorted out in two years. When the government sets up migration permission and says it is valid for two years, it is implying that the problem will be solved in two years, but we are experiencing a phenomenon dependent upon the political future and on economic deterioration in Venezuela."

For this reason, the academic recommends that Colombians understand that we cannot think in terms of separate processes, and that the postconflict process will play a big role in the fortunes of Venezuela. "We are going through the postconflict and post-Chavezism combined, and this carries implications," he points out.

Similarly, he insists that migratory processes mean transformations for a country that may well—depending on how they are dealt with—prove advantageous. "The migration Colombia is experiencing is not on a par with migratory processes from Mexico to the USA, nor with those of Africa to Europe or the Arab world to Turkey, because we are seeing a series of different phenomena, but we do also have many elements in common. There are no linguistic, ethnic, cultural, or religious differences; there are nuances, but not big differences," continues the researcher.

"Colombia does not have the same migratory experience to the rest of Latin America; Sirian-Lebanese, German, or Japanese migration did not mean the transformation of society in general, as will be the case in Colombia with Venezuelan migration, so we need to be prepared, and for this task it is important to understand that Venezuelan migration will mean medium-term development. Oligopolies will be broken. Competition will mean reinvention. Labor conditions will improve because Venezuelans have the capacity to unionize. When Venezuela has recovered, we Colombians will participate actively in that recovery, and this will mean economic, social, and cultural opportunities. These two countries are heading for change." ■