# The Intersection of Migration with Authoritarian and Illiberal Tendencies.

## Contextualized in Latin America and the Middle East

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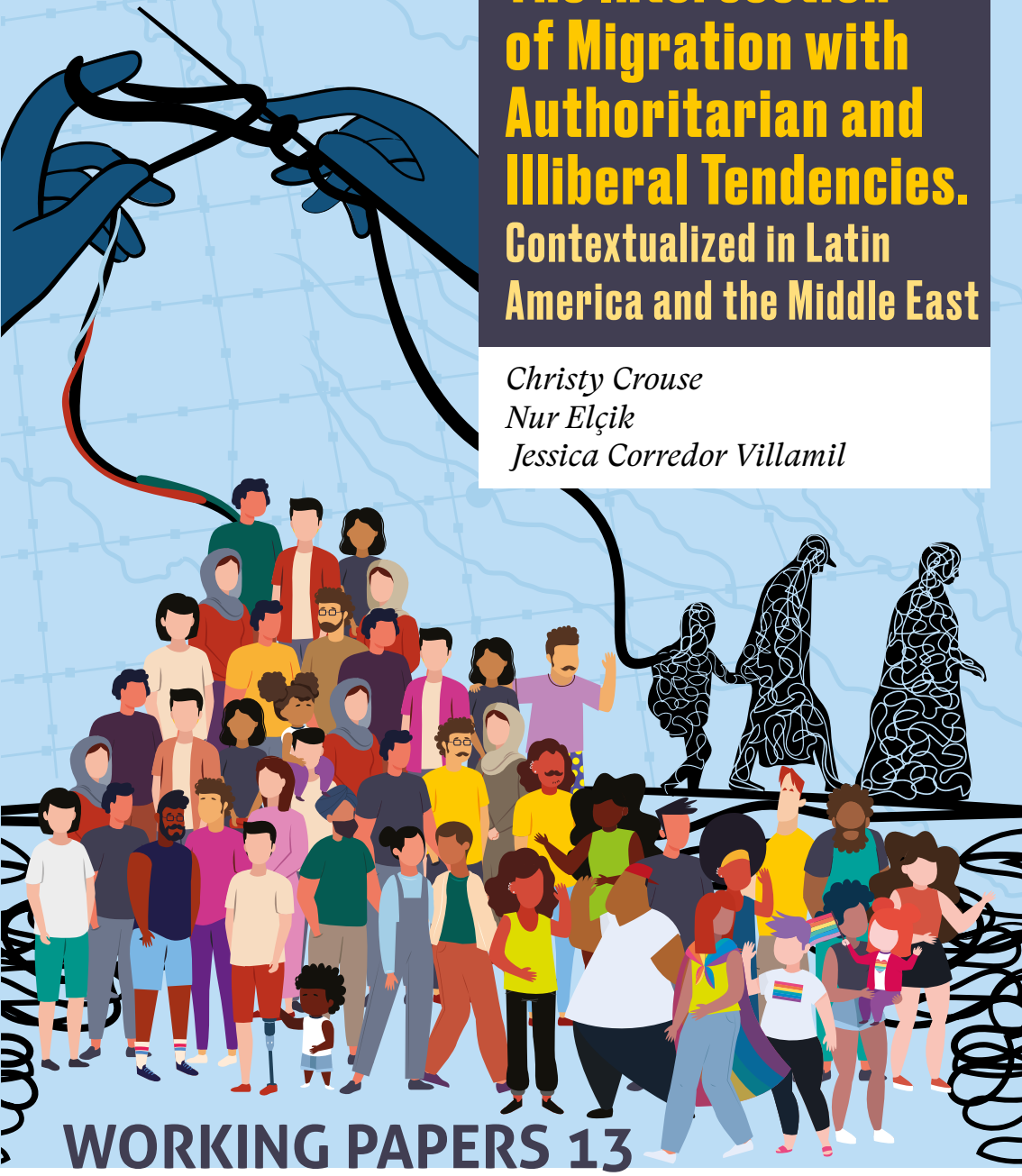

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## Resumen

Algunos gobiernos, democráticos hasta autoritarios, reaccionan con tendencias autoritarias e iliberales a los flujos migratorios. Estas prácticas tienden a afectar negativamente la inclusión, protección y trato digno de los migrantes. Consideramos esto un problema; la migración o el movimiento de personas es una realidad, y la respuesta a esta realidad es una elección que los países enfrentan constantemente. Deseamos comprender mejor los factores que desencadenan o mitigan estas respuestas autoritarias y liberales a la migración. Este estudio exploratorio y teórico aborda los matices tanto de la migración como de las tendencias autoritarias para brindar una introducción amplia y generadora de conversación a la intersección de estos temas. Para esta investigación, nos enfocamos en América Latina y el Caribe (ALC) y Medio Oriente y Norte de África (MENA), con ejemplos de Venezuela, Colombia, México, Turquía y Líbano. Estas dos regiones están experimentando actualmente importantes crisis migratorias. Nuestro estudio apunta a contribuir al diálogo y debate sobre las formas en que los países responden con tendencias autoritarias o iliberales a los flujos migratorios hacia, desde o a través de ellos. Nuestras preguntas guía incluyen: ¿Cómo los flujos migratorios revelan y provocan tendencias autoritarias y liberales en países con diferentes niveles de desarrollo democrático? ¿Cuáles son las tendencias iliberales y autoritarias que observamos en las respuestas a los flujos migratorios de países con diferentes niveles de democracia? ¿Cuáles son las prácticas autoritarias iliberales que contribuyen a la baja aceptación e integración de los migrantes en los países de destino? ¿Qué factores desencadenan o mitigan estas tendencias tanto en países receptores como emisores? Estas preguntas nos ayudan a explorar la relación entre la migración y las tendencias autoritarias e iliberales. Nuestros hallazgos identifican ciertos factores que creemos que desencadenan o atenúan dichas tendencias.

*Palabras clave:* migración, tendencias iliberales, tendencias autoritarias, América Latina, Medio Oriente.

## Summary

Democratic and authoritarian governments alike may respond to migrant flows with authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. These practices tend to negatively impact the inclusion, protection, and humane treatment of migrants. We view this as a problem; migration or the movement of people is a reality, and the response to this reality is a choice that countries are faced with constantly. We wish to better understand the factors that trigger or mitigate these authoritarian and illiberal responses to migration. This exploratory, theoretical study engages with the nuance of both migration and authoritarian tendencies to provide a wide and conversation-starting introduction to the intersection of these topics. For this research, we focus on Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with examples from Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon. These two regions are currently experiencing major migration crises. Our study aims to contribute to the conversation and debate about the ways in which countries respond with authoritarian or illiberal tendencies to migrant flows into, out of, or through them. Our guiding questions include: How are migration flows revealing and provoking authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in countries with different levels of democratic development? What are the illiberal and authoritarian tendencies that we observe in the responses to migrant flows of countries with differing levels of democracy? What are the authoritarian and illiberal practices that contribute to migrants' low acceptance and integration in destination countries? What factors trigger, or mitigate, these tendencies in both receiving and sending countries? These questions help us explore the relationship between migration and authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. Our findings identify certain factors that we believe either trigger or mitigate such tendencies.

*Keywords:* migration, illiberal tendencies, authoritarian tendencies, Latin America, Middle East.

To quote this book:
Baile Crouse, C., Elçik Sarı, N., & Corredor Villamil, J. (2024). *The Intersection of Migration with Authoritarian and Illiberal Tendencies: Contextualized in Latin America and the Middle East.* Dejusticia.

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# The Intersection of Migration with Authoritarian and Illiberal Tendencies:

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INCLO
INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF CIVIL LIBERTIES ORGANIZATIONS

*Working Paper* / Editorial Dejusticia

**Working Paper 13**
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The Intersection of Migration with Authoritarian and Illiberal Tendencies:
Contextualized in Latin America and the Middle East/Christy Baile Crouse, Nur Elçik Sarı, Jessica Corredor Villamil – Bogotá: Editorial Dejusticia, 2024.
93 pages; 17 x 24 cm. – (Working paper)
Digital ISBN: 978-628-7517-95-0
1. migration 2. illiberal tendencies 3. authoritarian tendencies 4. Latin America 5. Middle East.

ISBN: 978-628-7517-95-0 digital version

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Copy Editing: Hilary Burke
Layout: Precolombi EU, David Reyes
Cover design: Diana González Molina

First English Edition
Bogotá, Colombia, August 2024

This document is available at https://www.dejusticia.org

## Content

## Acknowledgments

First we would like to thank the International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations (INCLO) for sponsoring this study and for continuously advocating for broader civil society participation and the protection of human rights. We are also grateful to each individual who participated in this study, particularly for granting us interviews and for their insights about the connections between migration and illiberal and authoritarian tendencies. In addition, we would like to thank the editorial and logistical teams at Dejusticia for organizing a seminar to discuss this paper and preparing it for publication. Finally, our gratitude goes to all those who tirelessly resist illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in general, and especially those who defend the rights of people who migrate.

## Introduction

According to Freedom House's 2024 Freedom in the World assessment, global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024). The assessment found that "[a]lmost everywhere, the downturn in rights was driven by attacks on pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities—that harmed elections and sowed violence" (p. 2). Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while 21 countries made improvements (p. 1). Less than 20 percent of the global population currently lives in "fully free countries" (Morgan, 2021). Established democracies and democratically elected governments "are increasingly adopting authoritarian tactics," and this democratic decline often enjoys "significant popular support" (International IDEA, 2021a, p. 1).[1]

This democratic backsliding is on display when examining migration. Democratic and authoritarian governments alike may respond to migrant flows with authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. These practices tend to negatively impact the inclusion and humane treatment of migrants. We view this as a problem; migration or the movement of people is a reality, and the response to this reality is a choice that countries are faced with constantly. We wish to better understand these authoritarian and illiberal responses to migration.

Some research examines how migration and authoritarian and illiberal practices interact. One focus of the literature is on how

1 It is important to note that this shift indicates that there is a move toward authoritarianism, but it does not indicate whether this move is greater than the move toward democracy.

authoritarian governments treat their emigrant and diaspora communities. Tsourapas examines strategies these governments use against their emigrant and diaspora communities to "shed light on the interplay between migrants, diasporas, and the repressive strategies developed by authoritarian countries of origin" (Tsourapas, 2019, n.p.; Tsourapas, 2021). Another focus is migration policymaking and theoretical propositions regarding how the type of regime—whether a dictatorship or an authoritarian, autocratic, liberal, or illiberal government—affects migration policy and immigration (Mirilovic, 2010; Natter, 2021; Natter, 2023). Studies also look at how authoritarian regimes may benefit from certain types of migration policy and how societal anxieties about the economy or security may affect such policy (Koch, Weber & Werenfels, 2018; Crepaz & Naoufal, 2022). Finally, other research analyzes the authoritarian populism-migration nexus and evaluates why and how authoritarian populist rhetoric varies in different geopolitical contexts (Altınörs, 2021).

In this research study, our guiding questions aim to help us understand how migration flows are revealing and provoking authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in countries with different levels of democratic development. What are the illiberal and authoritarian tendencies that we observe in the responses to migrant flows by countries with differing levels of democracy? What are the authoritarian and illiberal practices that contribute to the low acceptance and integration of migrants in destination countries? What factors trigger, or mitigate, these tendencies in both receiving and sending countries? These are the questions that guide our study to understand the relationship between migration and authoritarian and illiberal tendencies.

Migration challenges the territorial borders of a place and also the identity of the political community in that place, making migrants easy to blame for instability and problems experienced by receiving and transit countries. Some research argues that economic conditions predict anti-immigrant attitudes (Kuntz, Davidov & Semyonov, 2017), while others focus on social or cultural concerns as factors that shape attitudes toward immigrants (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). In a context of right-wing authoritarianism, perceived cultural distance from immigrants shapes attitudes about immigration (Peresman, Carroll & Bäck, 2021). These host communities value group norms, cohesion, and stability (Duckitt, 1989). Thus, "a perceived need to protect the

ingroup from potential cultural threats can serve as a key mechanism by which authoritarian predispositions manifest as hostility toward immigration" (Peresman, Carroll & Bäck, 2021, p. 617).

Migrants and refugees have an impact on both the countries they come from and those they settle in economically, socially, and politically. They are essentially political actors in both countries. Public debate and concerns about migration—including whether multiculturalism "works," whether migrants contribute to the country's economic well-being, or whether it is possible to effectively integrate migrants into society—showcase the polarization of societies and policymakers around this specific issue.

Our approach to studying the topics of migration and authoritarianism does not focus on solely authoritarian regimes' responses to migration. On the spectrum from democratic to authoritarian governments, we think there is much more to study in terms of tendencies that are typical of authoritarian and illiberal governments but which many governments exhibit, whether or not they are formally categorized as authoritarian. We seek to point up some of these tendencies and how they relate to migrant flows, both in and out of countries.

Rather than comparing country contexts to demonstrate how they are similar or different, we select country cases in order to independently study each of their responses to migrant flows. In each case, we look at the country's context regarding the type of government and domestic political situation, migration patterns and characteristics of the migrant population, and the government and society's response to migrant flows. We then analyze all these country case responses in conjunction with each other to spot trends. By comparing countries' responses to migrant flows, we can see a trend of similar authoritarian and illiberal practices in countries with varying levels of democracy. In this study, we highlight some of those main practices in response to migrant flows and identify factors that trigger or mitigate such practices.

However, this does not mean that the various country responses to migration are exclusively due to a rise in authoritarianism. Our argument is not a causal one. We do not suggest that migration causes countries to become more authoritarian or illiberal, or that authoritarianism is the sole cause of emigration. Nor do we suggest that any given tendency (e.g. instrumentalization and securitization) is exclusively

due to authoritarianism. Rather, we argue that migration is met with authoritarian and illiberal responses in some circumstances and that this affects migrants negatively by excluding them, denying their human rights, or harming them in other ways. We use examples from our selection of countries with large migrant flows (either in or out) to illustrate and elucidate this interaction. This exploratory, theoretical study engages with the nuance of both migration and authoritarian tendencies to provide a wide and conversation-starting introduction to the intersection of these topics.

We begin our analysis in Section I with a look at authoritarian and illiberal tendencies and migration in our five chosen countries. In this section, we establish the current state of each country's government, the various either illiberal or authoritarian tendencies observed in those contexts, details about the migrant population in that country, and how migration relates to these tendencies. In Section II, we delve deeper into the observed tendency of instrumentalization of migration. In Section III, we discuss the securitization of migration understood as an authoritarian and illiberal tendency. Finally, we conclude with some key findings from our study about the triggering and mitigating factors of illiberal and authoritarian responses to migration in both receiving and sending countries.

## Regions of Study

For this research, we focus on Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with examples from Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon. These two regions are currently experiencing major migration crises.

LAC has made the most significant democratic gains worldwide in the last 40 years, becoming the third most democratic region in the world after North America and Europe. According to a 2022 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) report, the proportion of democracies in LAC has grown from 32 percent to 84 percent in the last 50 years (International IDEA, 2022). Democracy reached its peak in 2006-2007, when Cuba was the lone authoritarian country in the region. While democracy continues to expand, its quality is deteriorating and threats to democracy are rising in the region, "including polarization, disinformation, restrictions on

rights, and increasing attacks on environmental and human rights activists as well as key democratic institutions" (p. 30). According to Latinobarómetro (2023), overall support for democracy in the region fell to 48 percent in 2023, the lowest level in recent years. According to the report, Latin Americans' faith in democracy is waning generally. But it should be noted that there is not a single dominant democratic tendency in LAC. While Uruguay and Costa Rica rank among the best in the world in terms of democratic institutions and tools, and Colombia shows positive democratic tendencies, it is notable that Brazil, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, for example, have experienced a serious democratic decline. The democratic decline is especially evident in parts of LAC through various attacks on the rule of law. Such attacks are waged "on electoral management bodies, on constitutional courts, the media and national human rights institutions" (OHCHR, 2022). Other prominent features of the region are income inequality and corruption.

For decades the LAC region has been a net exporter of people, particularly to the United States and certain countries in the European Union, as its levels of economic development, job opportunities, and economic prospects have lagged behind other more prosperous regions. In the past 25 years, several countries in the LAC region have undertaken policies to stabilize and reform their economic structures and build representative democracies in order to put their economies on a path of prosperity and the rule of law.

Migration in LAC has increased due to economic uncertainty, gang-related violence and insecurity, and disasters linked to climate change, among other triggers (IOM, 2024). Five overlapping displacement situations are occurring simultaneously in the region, "including in and from Colombia, Venezuela, Central America and Mexico, Nicaragua, and Haiti" (UNHCR, 2023a, p. 1). Venezuela's situation alone has created more than 7 million migrants, and about 6 million of them are being received by other countries in the region (UNHCR, 2023a). Migration from Central American countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala has increased due to gang-related violence and economic hardship (UNHCR, 2022). Haiti's governmental crisis, high poverty rate, and natural disasters have also led to an outpouring of migrants in the past decade, many of whom eventually make their way northward via South America (Yates, 2021). In 2023, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, found that over 21 million people were displaced

across LAC. In receiving countries such as Colombia, the influx of migrants has put huge strains on the social safety net in areas like health and education (Sabatini & Wallace, 2021). These countries have also experienced backlash from the native population against migrants (Sabatini & Wallace, 2021).

The region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is one of the least democratic in the world (International IDEA, 2021b). When determining levels of democracy in MENA, there seem to be two main indicators to observe: 1) social protests based on economic and political demands and disturbances; and 2) pressure exerted by governments on the media, individuals, and institutions (Amirah-Fernández, 2021). The State of Democracy in Africa and the Middle East 2021 report highlights the democratic decline in the region. There is a trend of so-called democratic transitions, as seen in Sudan and Algeria; restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information, such as media restrictions and Internet blackouts; and MENA countries, in general, adopted authoritarian measures to enforce COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions (International IDEA, 2021b). In the aftermath of the pandemic, "it is difficult to separate out causally how much [the pandemic] drove this resurgent authoritarianism as opposed to other possible drivers," such as little international pressure for democratization or respecting human rights, support by powerful Gulf states for autocratic governance, or "regime survival instincts for governments facing polarized publics with mounting economic grievances" (Lynch, 2022, p. 3). Several pandemic measures by countries in the region, such as lockdowns, proved temporary (p. 3).

Elections in the region are not always competitive and many countries place severe restrictions on the operation or existence of political parties, making access to political power unequal. They are often held in an environment where rights and freedoms are restricted (International IDEA, 2021b). Deterioration of the media's rights, corruption, and the failure to protect civil liberties are some of the prominent features of MENA regimes.

Regarding migration in the Middle East, between 2005 and 2015, the number of migrants living in the region more than doubled, from about 25 million to around 54 million, mostly due to armed conflict and forced displacement (Conner, 2016). Turkey is home to the highest number of refugees in the world, hosting approximately 3.6 million

(Kaya, 2023). But in terms of refugees as a proportion of the total population, Lebanon ranks number one, with a total population of approximately 5.3 million, currently hosting an estimated 1.2 million refugees, mostly from Syria (World Bank, 2024). Syria (6.4 million) and Afghanistan (6.4 million) have generated the most international refugees in the world as of 2024, with Venezuela (6.1 million) and Ukraine (6 million) following (UNHCR, 2024b). Between 1990 and 2017, the amount of immigrants and refugees as a proportion of the Arab region's total population steadily increased from 6.3 percent to 9.2 percent (Khamis, 2020). Although improving economic conditions is one of the main reasons for migration, the unstable political and security situation in the region can be identified as one of the most important catalysts, as in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon (Khamis, 2020).

The wars in Syria and Iraq have produced the greatest share of MENA's refugees in recent years. The Israeli siege on Gaza has caused many Palestinians to flee to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Over 75 percent of Gaza's population, or roughly 1.7 million people, has been displaced since the hostilities began on October 7, 2023 (UNRWA, 2024). In addition to this, many have fled the political crises and civil conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. This unexpected increase in refugee numbers has left neighboring countries facing systemic challenges, while North African countries and Turkey have emerged as key transit hubs for refugee flows into Europe (Lynch & Brand, 2017). Many of these refugees are treated primarily "as potential security threats, whether through the destabilization of host countries or through recruitment into terrorism," and this securitization of migration does great injustice to migrants' real problems (Lynch & Brand, 2017, p. 6).

## Methodology

Our research method began with desk research about authoritarian and illiberal themes and tendencies in response to migration globally. We then selected five countries—Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon—representing two regions, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For country selection, we first decided that one goal of the study was to provide more information about some trends in South-South migration

in order to shift the focus from exclusively South-North migration narratives that do not accurately characterize movement patterns and consequences. Geographically, we included two countries from the MENA region (Turkey and Lebanon) and three countries from LAC (Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico). The primary reason for this was that we wanted to recognize the commonalities between these two regions, and the secondary reason was that we had not come across another study of these topics that included examples from both.

In terms of commonalities between the MENA and LAC regions, one major similarity is that both are experiencing the most significant present-day migration crises in the world. What led us to focus on these two regions was the robustness of authoritarianism in the MENA region, the fragility of the democratic ecosystem throughout LAC, human rights abuses both in LAC and MENA, states' tendencies to restrict civic space today, and promising protest movements that erupted across LAC and MENA against some governments, particularly because of social unrest or restrictions on civic space. The country examples allow us to illustrate and develop the ideas and connections between migration and illiberal tendencies.

Further, the migration patterns in these specific countries are all fairly different. These five countries exemplify a range of profiles with respect to two criteria: migration patterns and the level of democracy. First, they all have some experience with major migration flows. One has high rates of outgoing migration (Venezuela), while others have high rates of incoming migrants (Colombia, Turkey); one is primarily a transit country (Mexico), and another has large amounts of both outgoing and incoming migration (Lebanon). This perspective allows us to evaluate the same migration flow from the perspective of sending and receiving countries, or to evaluate the same migration flow from different country perspectives. Thus, the Venezuelan migrant flow is evaluated in the case of Venezuela and Colombia, and the Syrian migrant influx in the case of Turkey and Lebanon.

We also chose countries with varying levels of democracy. There is research showing that many people wrongly assume that coercive and authoritarian attitudes exist only among right-wing leaders (Clark, 2021; de Regt, Mortelmans & Smits, 2011). If we exclusively studied right-leaning authoritarian regimes to examine their response to migration, our view would be skewed. We did not want to ignore the

authoritarian and illiberal practices of more progressive or democratic governments. Regarding these five countries' extent of democracy and authoritarianism, Venezuela (Freedom House, 2024e) and Turkey (Freedom House, 2024d) could be qualified as authoritarian, while Mexico (Freedom House, 2024c), Lebanon (Freedom House, 2024b), and Colombia (Freedom House, 2024a) are democracies and show only some authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. Thus, this selection of countries helps us shed light on the dynamics of the intersection between authoritarian and illiberal tendencies and their effect on migrants, migration, and the national populations in these countries, regardless of their degree of democracy. This also may give us some insight into the importance of democracy for migration, or at the very least, into how these concepts relate to one another in some country cases.

We first conducted desk research about the country contexts for each of our cases. We reviewed news articles, academic papers, and civil society reports. Our research of news articles included reporting about government and leaders' actions in response to migrant flows and events that occurred in the country context related to national policies and migration.

After conducting this desk research, we reached out to two civil society organizations from each country for interviews. We selected organizations based on the priority of them working with migrants in each country's context, their experience with projects and research on migrants, and their current work in this area. We sought out organizations that did not simply accompany and support migrants directly but also engaged in studying trends and issues related to migration using a wide lens. For the contexts of Venezuela, Colombia, and Turkey, we interviewed two organizations from each country. In Mexico, we conducted interviews with three organizations. We were only able to connect with and interview one organization in Lebanon. This variation in the number of interviews merely reflects the different number of organizations that accepted our invitation.

These semi-structured interviews helped us understand where we should focus, which themes were important in terms of the migration–illiberal tendency relationship, and what possible sources we could benefit from during our desk research. The interviews helped highlight more subtle authoritarian and illiberal practices or responses

related to migrant flows and led us to focus more on investigating these tendencies and their effect on migrants.

Finally, we conducted further desk research regarding wider conceptual questions that were common themes throughout our interviews. We pulled relevant information from the interviews and country-specific desk research to supplement the sections in this report. To sum up, interviews have been the basis for some of the insights in our desk research, but they are not the primary basis of our comparative political inquiry about migration and authoritarian tendencies.

The reach of our exploratory study is limited based on our sources of desk research and interviews with civil society organizations. We do not have a comprehensive view of the migrants' experiences or the governmental perspective related to these themes. Our study is also limited by the response rate of the civil society organizations we contacted, their willingness to be interviewed, as well as our limited network of interviewees in each country. There is also some bias as we chose these organizations based on our own contact networks. Additionally, we found that our interviewees generally had a difficult time relating the concepts of "migration" and "authoritarianism." They responded to our questions either vaguely or from very different angles and, many times, directly acknowledged that they had never thought about those concepts together before. For us, this demonstrated the novelty and importance of the topic, and the void of existing research. It also represents a good exercise in thought for migration researchers in order to not overlook a potentially rich area of study.

Our study centers on contributing to the conversation and debate about the ways in which countries respond with authoritarian or illiberal tendencies to migrant flows into, out of, or through them. We show how certain tendencies such as instrumentalizing migrants for nationalist, political, or economic gain could be conceptualized as an authoritarian tendency. We show the same for exceptional security policies in response to migration whereby states militarize borders in the name of national security. Finally, we identify factors that trigger and mitigate these tendencies.

Beyond articulating how certain responses to migrant flows could be seen as authoritarian tendencies, we also show how these tendencies' implications for migrants and migration flows result in worsening treatment and greater human rights abuses. By using country examples

from two different regions, which currently have the world's most drastic migrant flows, we give important insight into how countries—and especially their leaders—choose to respond to those flows.

## Defining Concepts

A growing number of scholars and human rights advocates are frustrated with the limited manner in which we study authoritarianism. Marlies Glasius in her 2018 article entitled "What authoritarianism is … and is not: a practice perspective," discusses how exclusively focusing on textbook authoritarian regimes when studying authoritarianism is not viable for the current state of affairs worldwide. She outlines how many commentators denounce "illiberal leaders" or "everyday acts of authoritarianism" in democratic societies, but professional political scientists give little guidance on the existence of these phenomena. She argues that "they—we—lack the vocabulary and the tools to provide a clear, research-based analysis of these apparent phenomena of authoritarianism and illiberalism within established democracies" (p. 516). For instance, in comparative politics literature, authoritarian regimes are ones that do not hold periodic, free, and fair elections. And in political psychology literature, an authoritarian personality is one "characterized by a desire for order and hierarchy and a fear of outsiders" (Glasius, 2018, p. 516). But these definitions do not study the actions of democratically elected leaders who, once in power, begin to abuse their executive position and use these democratic institutions to consolidate their power. Thus, Glasius (2018) argues that authoritarian and illiberal practices should be defined, and studied, in order to more helpfully theorize about the current state of affairs. We will use her conceptualization of these practices:

> I will define authoritarian practices as patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice. These are distinct from illiberal practices, which refer to patterned and organized infringements of individual autonomy and dignity. Although the two kinds of practice often go together in political life, the difference lies in the type of harm effected: authoritarian practices primarily constitute a threat to democratic

> processes, while illiberal practices are primarily a human rights problem (p. 517).

This is exactly the roadblock that we and others intending to study migration and authoritarianism run up against. Migrants—people who move away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons (IOM, n.d.)—depart from and enter both democratic and authoritarian countries. So, when examining the response of countries to the influx or outpouring of migrants ("migration"), we look at both democratic and authoritarian government responses. And these practices sometimes share very similar, authoritarian, and illiberal characteristics, constituting what we would denominate "authoritarian and illiberal tendencies."

Migrants are a vulnerable group due to the stigmatization and exclusion they may face in the host society, related to their legal migration status (or lack thereof) and the process leading to their socioeconomic and cultural integration. Negative treatment can include aggression, as a result of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination. This can undermine their human rights, their access to work, and the right to freely exercise cultural rights—like language and religion, which characterize migrant communities—making it difficult for them to fully exercise their rights and lead a dignified life.

A few examples of authoritarian and illiberal tendencies that we identify in the context of migration are certain types of instrumentalization of migrants, border militarization, and securitization discourse. Some of the practices within these tendencies are authoritarian and some are illiberal, but together, they have consequences for democracy and human rights.

## I. AUTHORITARIAN AND ILLIBERAL TENDENCIES AND MIGRATION

Migration and authoritarianism are two phenomena that affect and interact with one another in a variety of complex ways. A lack of democracy and the presence of authoritarian trends are push factors when it comes to emigration, while democratic practices can be one of the pull factors for immigration. In general, people are attracted to countries with well-established democracies in which human and civil rights are respected. They can also be in search of better economic opportunities, and in most cases, better opportunities and respect for human rights and civil liberties coincide. However, the proximity of receiving and sending countries can be a major determinant for migrants and their choice of destination. Conversely, countries with semi-authoritarian[2] or authoritarian regimes encourage people to emigrate voluntarily or involuntarily, as their rights are more likely to be violated under authoritarian regimes. Emigration many times serves as "an escape valve for people who are affected by economic and political crises in their home countries" (Solimano, 2009, p. 9).

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**2** Semi-authoritarian regimes are political hybrids. They allow little real competition for power, thus reducing government accountability. However, they leave enough political space for political parties and civil society organizations to form, for an independent press to function to some extent, and for some political debate to take place. More information available at: Ottaway, M. (2003). The challenge of semi-authoritarianism: an introduction. *Democracy Challenged*. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DemChallenged_Intro.pdf.

In the long run, factors related to disparities in development levels across countries also shape the direction of migration, as people tend to move from nations with lower levels of development to those with higher ones. Nevertheless, there is an apparent paradox in the practice of established, wealthy democracies of ensuring that part of their immigrant community maintains an irregular legal status, either by tolerating irregular migration or by creating a dual labor-market regime in which legal and working rights prevail for nationals and regularized migrants while segments of the immigrant community do not have their rights protected (Rouse, et al., 2021). The paradox deepens when migrants are also met in democratic countries with human rights violations, abuse, stigmatization, and manipulation—illiberal and authoritarian practices that are not representative of the way those countries treat their national populations.

Anti-immigrant groups and movements exist all across the globe. They are usually associated with certain political beliefs, particularly nativist ones, and populist groups that arise due to economic, cultural, and social concerns. Besides the threat of more labor-market competition, some anti-immigrant groups emerge in response to fears that "foreign born individuals are unwilling and unable to assimilate, and that national culture is at risk of being diluted because of immigration" (Alesina & Tabellini, 2021, p. 9). Opposition also tends to be stronger against immigrants who are culturally further from natives (Alesina & Tabellini, 2021). These anti-immigrant groups' views are often based on stereotypes and overexaggerated notions of the number of immigrants and the extent of their differences with the native population (Alesina & Tabellini, 2021).

These movements are sometimes based on the argument that the ability to control immigration is *the* fundamental aspect of national sovereignty (McKeown, 2008). According to this argument, the so-called native population of a country should be able to decide "democratically" whether to let people in or keep them out. Immigration, in a particularly acute way, forces upon us discussion of the question "Who are we?" as posed by Samuel Huntington (Fukuyama, 2006). It is easy to agree on things like sports and certain foods as elements of a common culture, but it is much harder to say which aspects of national history are important (Fukuyama, 2006). According to Francis Fukuyama (2006), "if postmodern societies are to move toward a more serious

discussion of identity, they will need to uncover those positive virtues that define what it means to be a member of the larger community. If they do not, they will indeed be overwhelmed by people who are more sure about who they are" (p. 19).

These groups also tend to make migration a political issue while the pro-migration camp tries to depoliticize it, appealing to the realms of morality and law, which are supposed to stand above politics. Today, we continue to live in a prolonged state of exception in terms of the normalization of violent border regimes (Ozge, 2021). These exceptional policies by states aiming to securitize their borders lead to situations of violence and inhumane practices against migrants. For instance, refugee rescue activities in the Mediterranean Sea are criminalized, leading to the deaths of those migrating (International Commission, 2022). The separation of families and detainment of children at the US-Mexico border is another example (Pilkington, 2020). Due to this, resistance to such border regimes and the regular undermining of legal and moral codes, regulations, and obligations tends to "take[] the form of defending universal norms of humanity and law" (Ozge, 2021, p. 54). This strategy to raise the issue of migration above the political realm aims to protect certain principles like human rights, solidarity, cooperation, and hospitality from everyday politics in which the nation's interests are increasingly defined in contrast to the rights of "outsiders."

Researchers have also studied whether immigration harms or bolsters democracy, with both outcomes identified in the literature (Kapelner, 2024; Pevnick, 2024; Claassen, 2023; Escribà-Folch, Wright & Meseguer, 2022). International migration tends to increase the number of people who experience the benefits of democracy (Barsbai, et al., 2017). Experiencing democracy and democratic practices—such as the opportunity to participate in civil society, personal freedom, and the right to petition and protest government policy—does not necessarily directly benefit migrants themselves. But migrants do tend to tell communities in their home countries about those practices, which can empower them to engage in activism encouraging democratic practices there. This does not negate the idea that migrants may stimulate reactions that are illiberal or authoritarian, especially in receiving countries.

## A. Authoritarianism and migration in Venezuela: how a regime pushed people to emigrate

According to Freedom House (2024), Venezuela is "not free," and its political regime has been categorized as "competitive authoritarianism" (Boersner, 2021). This means that, although "democratic institutions formally exist, … their power holders in order to retain their power do not hesitate to resort to numerous non-democratic practices which even dictators in older times would not be ashamed of," particularly skewing the playing field against opponents (Bílek & Vališková, 2020, p. 4). Essentially, "Venezuela's democratic institutions have been deteriorating since 1999, [and] conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher government crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party's use of thoroughly flawed elections to seize full control of state institutions" (Freedom House, 2024e, n.p.).

The government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is responsible for massive human rights violations. Indeed, the government "and its security forces are responsible for extrajudicial executions and short-term forced disappearances and have jailed opponents, prosecuted civilians in military courts, tortured detainees, and cracked down on protesters" (HRW, 2022b, n.p.). Of the approximately 15,756 people who have been arbitrarily detained since 2014, about 9,400 are on conditional release and subject to further penal repercussions (HRW, 2022b). The government uses migration as a way to expel people who dissent or protest against it by sometimes even setting people free from prison to be sent directly to the airport to leave the country, as a condition of that freedom (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Many young people and human rights defenders—those who would protest—have already emigrated, lowering the frequency of protests. This contributed to the weakening of democracy, despite the fact that Venezuelan civil society has been both organized and strengthened in recent years, thanks to the strategies its members have developed to overcome the numerous barriers they have had to face (Monsalve, et al., 2021).

Hugo Chávez, the former president of Venezuela (1999-2013), died in 2013. When Maduro then took over the presidency, there were expectations that, because of his background working with labor unions, he would be a non-militaristic president focused on protecting

people's rights. But the complete opposite occurred (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022). Authoritarian tendencies in the country grew under his regime. Maduro began to suspend certain democratic spaces, which translated into a constitutional rupture or unconstitutional turn (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022). The undemocratic circumstances, along with a worsening economic situation, spurred mass protests in Venezuela in 2017, in which thousands of people took to the streets and were subject to a severe crackdown (HRW, 2017). However, despite these protests, significant changes to the anti-democratic state of affairs have yet to take place (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022).

The country has been increasingly securitized as Maduro has implemented "Operations for the People's Liberation," in which government security forces detain and kill people in certain sectors of the capital, Caracas. Another mechanism known as the Special Action Forces is used to exercise control and combat insecurity as well (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022).

The government does not recognize or cooperate with civil society or human rights defenders (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Concerns about brutal policing and harassment of human rights defenders and independent media personnel persist among human rights groups (HRW, 2022b). The government continues to threaten and arbitrarily detain civil society organization leaders (WOLA, 2021). One example of this was the detention of five employees of the Venezuelan NGO Azul Positivo, an organization that helps people with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (WOLA, 2021). These employees were held for nearly a month on unsubstantiated charges of money laundering and terrorist financing (WOLA, 2021). Since 2010, the Supreme Court has held that people or organizations that receive international financing can be convicted of betraying the country. Within this culture of anti-foreign engagement, "Venezuelan authorities and security forces have carried out a systematic campaign against humanitarian and human rights organizations, freezing bank accounts, issuing arrest warrants, raiding offices and detaining some of their members for questioning," all while limiting international funding and requiring organizations to share sensitive information with the government (HRW, 2022b, n.p.). The government maintains that civil society organizations are collaborating with the United States and the

international community to "become millionaires off the poor," intending to delegitimize these entities so that Venezuelan people lose trust in them (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022).

State censorship as well as self-censorship for fear of retaliation by the government have caused the media to produce favorable rather than critical content about the current regime. Between 80 and 90 percent of the media is owned or controlled by the government, so these outlets do not broadcast protests or contradict the government in order to avoid sanctions (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). One example of this was a government raid of the *El Nacional* newspaper headquarters after the Supreme Court ordered the media outlet to pay 13 million US dollars in damages for allegedly defaming a member of the National Assembly of Venezuela (HRW, 2022b).

A lack of independence in the judicial system leads to impunity for crimes committed by government personnel and security forces, to the point that "[j]udicial authorities have participated or been complicit in the abuses" (HRW, 2022b, n.p.; J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). In fact, a United Nations Fact-Finding Mission found patterns of human rights violations and widespread and systematic course of conduct amounting to crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2020), and the International Criminal Court's prosecutor opened an investigation into potential crimes against humanity committed in Venezuela (ICC, 2021; ICC, 2022).

In politics, international observers have noted how political opponents to the current administration have experienced persecution, including being "arbitrarily disqualified from running for office" (HRW, 2022b, n.p.) and having unequal access to the media. Meanwhile, observers also found that a lack of judicial independence and of respect for the rule of law undermined elections' impartiality and transparency (HRW, 2022b). The Supreme Court has also disbanded opposition and dissident parties (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). In 2020, President Maduro granted a collective amnesty to 110 opposition politicians, allowing them to participate in the elections. The opposition claimed that this divided its votes, leading to unfair voting conditions (The Guardian, 2020). Another example of political manipulation is that, since 2012, the judiciary has gutted and replaced the leadership of nine political parties with people who are more supportive of the government (Posado, 2021).

Venezuela has shifted from being a country that used to host incoming migrants from Colombia and elsewhere, to a country primarily of emigration (UNHCR, 2023b). Currently, the Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis is one of the largest recorded refugee crises in the world, along with the Syrian refugee crisis. South American countries have faced numerous challenges with large-scale immigration from Venezuela since 2015 due to the humanitarian crisis gripping the country.

As of 2024, the regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V)—co-led by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—estimated that 7.77 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees were living abroad, with 6.59 million of them remaining in LAC (R4V, 2024b). The majority of the Venezuelan population that migrates stays in LAC because it is most similar culturally and linguistically, and it is cheaper than migrating to most other countries (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Colombia has received the most Venezuelan migrants and has created pathways for their regularization (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). This flow of migrants from Venezuela—representing about 20 percent of the country's total population—is the largest migration crisis in the region's recent history. The region has not developed a coordinated strategy, leaving up to the host state decisions about protections and the availability of refugee or regularized status for migrants (HRW, 2022b). By December 2023, there were over 1.2 million pending asylum claims by Venezuelans worldwide and a total of 347,695 recognized Venezuelan refugees (R4V, 2023b).

Demographically, the majority of Venezuelan migrants are young, working-age people, with 90 percent of them between the ages of 15 and 49. This has led to older adults in Venezuela experiencing conditions of greater vulnerability (Jiménez, 2022). Venezuelans lack a variety of rights, including reproductive rights for women and rights for LGBTQ people (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022).

Migration out of Venezuela began in the early 2000s with businesspeople leaving due to the lack of private investment opportunities. In 2010, some people left the country as political asylees (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022). Later, middle-class

Venezuelans, seeing a bleak economic future for the country, began emigrating for better opportunities. In 2015, as Maduro began establishing his policies—which did not align directly with Chávez's vision or with the Chavismo movement—some Chávez supporters began to migrate. Then, in 2017, a large exodus of Venezuelans began with *caminantes*, or "walkers," desperate for a better life, making dangerous journeys by foot out of the country (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022). Beyond reasons of authoritarian and illiberal practices, this migration was also predominantly due to the complex humanitarian crisis that was unfolding and that continues today. Millions in Venezuela are unable to access minimal healthcare, nutrition, or safe water (HRW, 2022b). According to a 2022 survey of Venezuela's 28 million residents, 50 percent live in extreme poverty (Cheatham & Roy, 2023). This represents the highest rate of extreme poverty in Latin America. With these "walkers" in 2017, the international community began noticing the vast amount of people leaving Venezuela and the gravity of circumstances in that country. Venezuelans have continued to migrate, especially those who are earning in Venezuelan currency instead of US dollars (R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022).

Venezuelans who intend to migrate to other countries have difficulty obtaining passports and other identity documents from the government. They are expensive, costing around 200 US dollars for a passport and more money for visas—a sum too high for many to pay (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022; R. Uzcategui, personal communication, March 25, 2022). Thus, they are forced to travel with an irregular/illegal migration status (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). In the past, there were regional agreements that made migration between countries easier, but Chávez left the Andean Community of Nations and did not integrate the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees into Venezuela's national legislation (Comunidad Andina, n.d.; Malamud, 2006). Many countries now require a visa from Venezuelans who seek to travel there. Colombia and Venezuela have an agreement whereby Venezuelan identity documents can be used to begin a regularization process in Colombia.

The legal framework on migration in Venezuela is based on the Immigration and Migration Law, enacted in 2004, which gives migrants

the same rights as Venezuelan citizens, within the limits of the Venezuelan Constitution. There is no discrimination based on migration status, although both the right to vote and the right to be elected remain exclusive rights of nationals. Because of the low amount of immigration to Venezuela, the more relevant legal framework relates to the access that departing Venezuelans have to identity documents. In 2019, many countries stopped recognizing Venezuela as a legitimate administration and closed their consulates in the country, making it difficult for Venezuelans to access visas, passports, and other documents for travel, even though more options for regularization have become available as time has passed (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). This also made it difficult for Venezuelans to migrate with a regularized status (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Because of this lack of regularized status, many migrants lack guaranteed access to basic rights, facing arbitrary deportations, violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation, xenophobia, and abuse by migration officials (UNHCR, 2023b; Diario Las Américas, 2022).

## B. Democracy and migration in Colombia: a new experience of mass immigration

Colombia is a country that has been cataloged by various actors as one of "the longest-standing democracies in Latin America" (Freedom House, 2024a) in contrast to the continent's many coups d'état and military dictatorships during the 20th century. Colombia was the exception to these dynamics since, although it had a short military dictatorship (1953-1957) that took power by means of a coup, that regime cannot be considered as violent and repressive as those of Chile and Argentina, for example. Freedom House lists Colombia as a free country (Freedom House, 2024a) while Civicus qualifies Colombia's civic space as "repressed," which is the category prior to "closed" (Civicus, 2024).

The most recent historiography on Colombia in the 20th century questions this notion that it is the region's most long-standing and healthy democracy. What has characterized the country's recent history is growing inequality and, above all, the long history of internal armed conflict between the Colombian state and what was the oldest guerrilla group in the world (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army, known as the FARC-EP), until the peace

agreement was signed in 2016. Forced displacement and land dispossession in Colombia have had devastating consequences. This armed conflict produced more than 7 million victims of forced displacement and, conservatively, about 1.2 million hectares of land and territories dispossessed as a direct or indirect consequence (Martínez Carillo, 2019). Women and "[m]inority populations such as indigenous groups and African-descendants are over-represented in the displaced population in comparison to their proportion of the general population" (Peace Brigades International, 2010, p. 6).

Colombia has not been able to successfully implement an agrarian reform that foresees a redistribution of land ownership. This is relevant because two of the central causes of Colombia's conflict are "unequal and informal landholding, and a history of government neglect and abandonment of the countryside" (Isacson, 2021, p. 7). According to 2015 statistics from Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), in rural areas, less than 1 percent of the population owned more than half of Colombia's agricultural land (USAID, 2017). "This inequality of land ownership and its impact on perpetuating poverty and disenfranchisement has been one of the country's most problematic sociopolitical issues in the modern era" (p. 8). This intersects with factors such as race and ethnicity due to the geographic distribution of groups in Colombia. For example, "Afro-Colombians have disproportionately high rates of forced displacement – upwards of 20-30% in some years" (p. 9).

The peace agreement between the Colombian state and the FARC-EP was hailed as one of the most progressive and holistic peace agreements in history. Its implementation seeks to address justice for victims of violence, mass atrocities, and human rights violations (Isacson, 2021). However, the peace accords have not been implemented as agreed, partly due to the lack of political will of the government of former President Iván Duque (2018-2022), whose party, the Democratic Center, formally opposed the peace negotiations between the Santos government (2010-2014 and 2014-2018) and the FARC guerrillas, along with the agreement's approval and its subsequent implementation. But there are even more concerning causes of continued violence: state neglect or rather the lack of state presence and support in many regions, and the territorial-political dominance of illegal economies,

particularly drug trafficking and the illegal exploitation of natural resources (mining, forestry resources, plant and animal species, and fossil fuels) (Molano-Rojas & Moncada, 2017).

Since the signing of the peace agreement, more than 350 signatories have been killed (United Nations, 2023). Additionally, a wide range of activists and social justice leaders have been targeted, including "Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, environmentalists, journalists, and women's rights defenders" (The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2022, n.p.). During 2022-2023, figures show that a leader is killed every two days with an average of 14 murders each month (Pares, 2023).

Colombia's historical context should be taken into account to analyze the current phenomenon of migration. The country's armed conflict began in the mid-to-late 1920s, with groups vying for control over land and the government, spurred in part by rising coffee prices and increased government spending. The countryside was the battlefield: left-leaning or communist areas were attacked by peasant organizations armed by the government, politicians, and landowners, with the militant backing of the Catholic Church and sectors of the security forces (Molano Bravo, 2015). Forced displacement was a response to the actions perpetrated directly against the population (massacres, selective assassinations, recruitment, eviction orders). This forced displacement was both a reaction by victims and a strategy used by armed actors to control geographically strategic territories (Comisión de la Verdad, n.d.). Between 1991 and 2002, more than 3 million cases of displacement were recorded, the most of any period in the history of the armed conflict (Comisión de la Verdad, n.d.). In total, 7.3 million forcibly displaced individuals were registered as of 2016 (Carvajal, 2017).

But for many victims of forced displacement, crossing international borders has been the only alternative to obtain the protection and assistance that the Colombian state failed to provide (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2014). The first big wave of Colombian international migration was in 1965 to Venezuela, the United States, Panama, and Ecuador, and then in 1985 specifically to Venezuela (Mejía Ochoa, 2012). An estimated 557,000 Colombians migrated to Venezuela, the United States, Ecuador, Panama, Canada, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia

between 1963 and 1973 (Carvajal, 2017). A second wave of migration started in the late 1990s to these same countries and also several European countries. Between 1996 and 2005, 1.9 million Colombians emigrated to other countries. By 2012, the number of Colombian migrants reached approximately 4.7 million (Carvajal, 2017).

Throughout the 20th century, Colombia was a net emigration country. Until the beginning of the 21st century, immigrants never constituted more than 1 percent of the Colombian population. This marginal share of immigration to Colombia explains the country's historical absence of a comprehensive immigration policy (Mejía Ochoa, 2018). The massive influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees starting in 2016 is Colombia's first experience with tending to and housing such a considerable number of immigrants. Therefore, when the country's lack of technical knowledge and capacity is evaluated along with its lack of institutional capacity, Colombia is not an ideal destination for migrants and refugees. The country's cash-based informal economy accounts for about half of all jobs and is characterized by unscrupulously poor wages, especially for Venezuelans, who often accept wages much lower than those earned by locals due to the lack of formal alternatives (Ramírez Bolívar, Arroyave Velásquez & Corredor Villamil, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Colombia shares a 2,200-kilometer (1,367-mile) border with Venezuela, with seven formal and hundreds of informal border crossings. When in 2015 Venezuela first decided to close the border and expel 22,000 Colombians living there, Colombia was home to 31,471 Venezuelan immigrants (Save the Children, 2020). These numbers have risen sharply due to the ongoing acceleration of Venezuela's political and socioeconomic crisis. With more than 2.8 million Venezuelans emigrating to Colombia by August 2023 (R4V, 2024a), the country has borne the brunt of the impact of this migration wave. Colombia's share of migrants accounts for almost 40 percent of all Venezuelan migrants in the region (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023). Also, an increasing number of migrants—many of them Haitian—have crossed the perilous Darien Gap jungle from Colombia to Panama, where they hope to find a route to the United States or Canada (IOM, 2021).

The legal regime for migrants coming into Colombia used to center around the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants

(Decreto 216), which complements existing refugee law. This statute, based on protecting migrants' human rights, aimed to facilitate a transition for Venezuelan migrants from a special, temporary legal status to regularization under the ordinary migration regime. Under this status, Venezuelans have legal residency for ten years, and in that time, they are expected to acquire a resident visa. Only undocumented Venezuelan migrants who demonstrated that they were in Colombia as of January 31, 2021 were able to benefit from this program (Gobierno de Colombia, n.d.). Now, President Gustavo Petro's government not only dissolved many of the structures and policies that shaped this response, but it has yet to institute policy around the Venezuelan migrant situation, disregarding the Venezuelan presence in Colombia and their specific needs (Guerrero Ble, 2023).

Despite government efforts, over 310,000 Venezuelan migrants are undocumented, meaning they have trouble accessing essential services and getting work (R4V, 2023a). In 2021, 63.4 percent of the Venezuelan migrant population lived in monetary poverty, compared with 39.3 percent of the Colombian population, and 85.4 percent lacked health insurance (Bitar, 2022). As of June 2019, approximately 83 percent of Venezuelan citizens in Colombia worked in the informal sector. In the case of those who managed to enter the formal labor market, they worked more hours (between 50 and 52 hours per week) and earned between 10 and 12 percent less than their Colombian peers, while 40 percent of Venezuelan households in Colombia shared the difficulty of finding a job and lacked employment income (Ramírez Bolívar & Arroyave Velásquez, 2021). The situation is especially critical for women since 89 percent of them reported having problems finding work and 60 percent indicated that they can eat only two meals a day (Ramírez Bolívar & Arroyave Velásquez, 2021).

For many in Colombia, Venezuelan migrants are a threat not only to the economy, but also to security, with some Colombians alleging that they are responsible for crime and insecurity in the big cities where they have settled (El Espectador, 2020), and are recruited by drug-trafficking organizations in Colombia's rural areas (El Espectador, n.d.). These notions may arise from the fact that many migrants are primarily residing in impoverished areas and are unable to access formal employment via the job market.

## C. Migration in Mexico: the subtle impact of authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in migration control

Since 2000, Mexico has been characterized as an electoral democracy with routine alternation in power between parties. Nevertheless, "the country suffers from severe rule of law deficits that limit full citizen enjoyment of political rights and civil liberties" (Freedom House, 2024c, n.p.). Despite being a democracy, several illiberal tendencies are present in its governance, including President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) using inflammatory language against opponents, "including media outlets, civil society organizations, and autonomous state institutions" (Freedom House, 2024c, n.p.). Additionally, AMLO's administration "has assigned an increasing number of governance tasks to the military, one of Mexico's least accountable institutions" (Freedom House, 2024c, n.p.).

Over the past two decades, since Mexico turned to a democratic governmental system, it has been described as a "flawed democracy." This categorization is due to high corruption and impunity rates, weak protection of civil and human rights, low public confidence in political branches of government, and weak rule of law. These factors culminate to cause intense criminal violence and an overly oppressive state response (Felbab-Brown, 2019).

AMLO was elected in 2018 as the country's first leftist president after various right-leaning regimes. He promised to focus on building a democratic rule of law through major reforms in the judicial and security sectors while also rolling back neoliberal policies (Trejo, 2021). He also said he would remove the military and security forces from civilian life and positions (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022). He inherited a government with authoritarian-leaning enclaves in the judicial system, armed forces, and police (Trejo, 2021). AMLO has yet to transform these institutions and has consistently contradicted his campaign promises.

Although AMLO stated during his campaign that he intended to move away from authoritarianism, especially the use of excessive force, certain issues such as organized crime have made this move difficult. In AMLO's political discourse, he generally "rejects the use of force as an instrument of the legitimacy of the Mexican State, [yet] he gradually qualifies this assumption, as the demands of the moment require it"

(Jara Solenzar & Morales Brito, 2021, p. 204). He has remained allied with the armed forces, using them to militarize public and national security. AMLO has made the National Guard occupy a civil policing role even though it has military mandates (WOLA, 2022). For instance, he has given power to military personnel to resolve civil security issues and awarded them construction contracts for civilian infrastructure projects, such as airport construction (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022). These types of policies used against organized crime and drug groups are causing extreme violence and human rights violations. His administration also controls the prosecutor's office, allowing impunity for his allies while punishing opponents (Trejo, 2021).

Additionally, under his administration, attacks have increased against journalists (Civicus, 2022b), feminist organizations, women (The New York Times, 2022), and human rights defenders (Guevara-Rosas, 2022). Few of the assassinations and attacks end in some form of justice, with impunity remaining the typical outcome (Civicus, 2022b).

Mexico occupies an interesting geopolitical position as "a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants, and increasingly a country to which they return" (Inter-American Commission, 2013, p. 1). These mixed migration flows create a variety of complex dynamics within the country. Today, Mexico officially acts as a "waiting room" for migrants with pending asylum applications to reside in the United States (García Zamora, Gaspar Olvera & García Macías, 2020). A large number of Mexican displaced people who are fleeing violence in their country also pressures the US southern border (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022). Mexico has effectively agreed with the United States to allow Central American migrants and other migrants traveling north to wait in Mexico while their US asylum applications are processed. This allows the United States to externalize its borders, despite this being a costly policy (Schafer & Besserer, 2021).

The vast majority of the migrants passing through and staying in Mexico are from Central America, specifically Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This Central American migration has defining characteristics: it is massive and collective, many times in caravans; it is shown and reported on in the media; many young people, children, and families are migrating; and it is both spontaneous and organized

(García Zamora, Gaspar Olvera & García Macías, 2020). These characteristics are "a reflection of a deep economic, social, political, institutional and survival crisis in Central America, especially in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador" (García Zamora, Gaspar Olvera & García Macías, 2020, p. 194). In these three countries, there is a disturbing level of authoritarian tendencies and violence, along with deteriorating economic conditions (Call, 2021). Venezuelans and Colombians also attempt a perilous journey to the United States crossing the Darien Gap, which is one of the world's most dangerous migration routes because it requires crossing a remote, roadless expanse of dense rainforest, mountains, and swamps, measuring nearly 100 kilometers (60 miles) long. Many of these migrants have an irregular status, and large numbers stay in Mexico for long periods of time despite not having documentation. In addition, many of them have a secondary education at most, and few are aware of their rights as migrants in Mexico. Once arrived and settled, many migrant women find jobs doing housework and men tend to work in construction or factories (D. Villamar Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

Mexico's legal framework on migration is primarily regulated by the Migration Law of 2011 and its implementation procedures, contained in the Regulations on the Migration Law. Equality between nationals and foreigners is set forth in the Mexican Constitution. Foreigners can remain in Mexico under three statuses: (1) visitor; (2) temporary resident; or (3) permanent resident, with varying conditions, benefits, and documents (Ornelas Cruz & Jesús Mora, 2021). One of the fundamental values of Mexico's migration law, based again on the Mexican Constitution, is respect for the human rights of foreigners, irrespective of their origin, nationality, gender, ethnicity, age, or migration status. Foreigners are guaranteed the constitutional rights granted to nationals, except they may not participate in the country's political affairs. Mexican migration policy has maintained a national security focus, while its economic policy is neoliberal. This has marginalized migrants in the country and has meant that migrants' capacity to help the Mexican economy has not been fully capitalized on (García Zamora, Gaspar Olvera & García Macías, 2020). Mexico deports approximately 100,000 Central American people each year, almost double the amount the United States deports (Schafer & Besserer, 2021).

The AMLO government has lacked transparency with regard to its administration of migration. The government does not collaborate with civil society organizations in the formulation of migration policy. This policy has incorporated new requirements for migrants with more bureaucratic roadblocks, taxes, and fines (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022). Since so many migrants transit through Mexico to get to the United States, Mexico uses this to negotiate with its neighbor. The Mexican government is able to get economic, political, and social benefits from the US government by using the containment of migrants as a bargaining chip. The former US policy called "Migrant Protection Protocols"—or "Remain in Mexico"—allowed the United States to push migrants across the border to stay in Mexico, usually in dangerous circumstances, to await their immigration decisions (American Immigration Council, 2022). The United States and Mexico have worked together to deport migrants in mass numbers. Under the former US policy of immediately expelling certain migrants due to the risk of spreading COVID-19 (known as "Title 42"), the Joe Biden administration carried out 990,000 expulsions (Chishti & Bolter, 2022). Meanwhile, in Mexico, deportations were up 65 percent in 2021 compared with a year prior (Montes, 2021).

Finally, Mexico has militarized its southern border, deploying the National Guard and using securitization techniques against migrants. Approximately 12,500 National Guard members are stationed there to detect and detain migrants. This use of the military to control migration seems to be rooted in the need for more resources and personnel to process migrants quickly (Jara Solenzar & Morales Brito, 2021).

## D. Authoritarianism and migration in Turkey: expectations for Syrian refugees

According to an International IDEA report (2021a), Turkey ranks first among countries that have moved away from democracy in the past decade. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) noted that three major political issues in Turkey are "the consolidation of authoritarianism, economic vulnerability, and an increasingly conflictual foreign policy" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022b, p. 3). The centralized power of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration has resulted in a shrinking of civic space and aggressive state control over civil

society organizations (Toepler, et al., 2020). Other characteristics of authoritarianism in Turkey include constraints on political opposition, restrictive access to legal resources and justice mechanisms, politicization of key institutions like the judiciary and election commission, promulgation of repressive laws, imprisonment of peaceful opposition figures, fueling of nationalism, and more aggressive foreign policy (Hawthorne, Tahiroğlu & White, 2022).

In terms of civic space, the most prominent change is the closure of 1,500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and labor unions following a thwarted coup attempt in July 2016 (Nurtsch, 2017). Now, the few human rights organizations that still exist in Turkey face "increased government audits, exorbitant administrative fines, politically motivated closure cases, and judicial harassment of their executives" (Bor, 2024, n.p.). The shutdown of the NGOs has had a severe chilling effect on civil society. Turkey has become a society wary of organizing. And in the absence of these NGOs, civic space is dominated by faith-based organizations that also operate in the field of social assistance and are supported by the government (Arslan Köse, 2019). The closure of foreign humanitarian organizations that cooperated with national NGOs also created anxiety among international organizations and negatively affected international solidarity (Weise, 2017). Additionally, refugee and migrant defenders who are themselves migrants and refugees are at great risk of retaliation; in 2022, "refugee activists from Iran faced deportation for attending a demonstration against Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on violence against women" (Bor, 2024, n.p.).

Turkey is a country of mixed emigration, transit, and immigration movements, and a large majority of migrants in Turkey have left their countries due to unsustainable humanitarian conditions, such as war and violence due to political, economic, and social conflict (Tahiroglu, 2022). Migrants are not attracted to Turkey for its political climate, but rather are forced to migrate due to ongoing armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Severe problems in these countries seem to motivate people to move from a worse situation to a less awful one in Turkey. A second reason for the incoming migration is geographical location. Turkey is a place of transit for migrants from MENA and Central Asia traveling to Europe. But European countries' rejection of migrants prompts illegal border crossings along dangerous routes and

also results in the permanent residence of migrants in Turkey. This rapid population growth has contributed to migrants having difficulty accessing basic services in Turkey (Ataman, 2019).

Today, Turkey is by far the top refugee-hosting country in the world. The number of Syrian refugees in Turkey who remain under Temporary Protection status is approaching 4 million (Norman, et al., 2024).[3] The situation of Syrians is one of the most discussed issues both in society and among politicians in Turkey. The country initially pursued an open-door policy for the refugees, but then Ankara began consistently tightening restrictions and closing its border. The open-door policy ended in 2016 in order to limit and control the number of refugees flowing in (Makovsky, 2019).

The mass migration of Syrian refugees to Turkey, which started in 2011, is an important turning point in Turkish migration history. Most Turkish people expect that Syrians will go back home one day, and Turkish leaders frequently announce that all Syrians will eventually return to Syria. This stance has delayed the state's adoption of the necessary legal framework and support measures for Syrians living in Turkey in the last 13 years.

Due to the country's severe economic crisis—with a plummeting currency and record-high inflation—anti-migrant sentiment and social conflicts have grown in recent years (Sözen, 2022). Migrants are characterized in the media and public discourse as villains, victims, or apolitical. Even prior to the Syrian refugee influx, a majority of photos, social media posts, and public discourse portrayed migrants as victims (Kolukırık, 2009). The image of the "migrant victim" was used as an exemplary object to show the people of Turkey how precious their homeland, their rights, and especially their state systems are (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). In addition, rising nationalism in Turkey is used not only by the ruling party, but also by opposition parties, creating polarization. And amid this right-left polarization, migrants are posed as a political problem by both sides.

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3 Turkey adopted a new regulation on temporary protection for Syrians in October 2014. According to that status, Syrian migrants do not have the right to receive refugee status. They also do not have the right to apply for conditional refugee status to be resettled in a third country (Sert, 2016).

The primary expectation for migrants is that they will gratefully accept what is offered to them (Kolukırık, 2009). When we evaluate the Turkey case from this perspective, it seems that migrants' expectations should be limited by the country's financial and social resources. This was declared by Turkish government officials who underlined that the country can only provide limited services for migrants (Yeni Safak, 2022).

In Turkey, there is a relationship between authoritarianism and the idea of "visibility." If you are a person who demands more than is given to you, you are accused of being "too visible" and you are asked to remain silent; but when it comes to national issues such as defending the homeland, you can be accused of being "invisible" if you do not speak up. While local people complain and express their dissatisfaction with the "visibility" of Syrian refugees (particularly in the job market, at hospitals, or schools), Syrians are accused of being "invisible" when it comes to paying taxes or contributing to the development of Turkey.

The humanitarian response services seem to treat Syrians as passive recipients. This paradigm, which interprets immigrants as passive actors, overlooks their active influence in building a new life. They are depicted as mere passive agents who obtain information, take language and vocational lessons, and receive services from the state without producing value. As a result of this perception in Turkey, public discourse, public service announcements, and social media posts effectively instruct migrants on how to be accepted by society: by accepting existing conditions and their lack of refugee status, unable to demand protection of their rights (Yazıcı, 2015).

Turkey's national migration framework has undergone a significant transition in recent years. Turkish migration law and management is centrally administered by the state. "The introduction of new sets of legislation, including the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013, and Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) in 2014, together with the development of a new state agency to deal with migration affairs, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM)," led to the definition of "migration categories such as regular migrant, irregular migrant and forced migrant and it set the criteria for granting temporary protection status" (Çetin, 2018, n.p.). Furthermore, the 2016 Law on International Labor Force No. 6735 aims to facilitate labor migration and labor market integration (IOM, 2018).

Meanwhile, Turkey has migrant detention centers called "removal centers," in which migrants and refugees are obligated to sign "voluntary return" documents and are deported (Bor, 2024). For the most part, "Syrians and other refugees from countries to the south and east of Turkey's borders are granted 'temporary protection' rather than full refugee status" (Hickson & Wilder, 2023, n.p.). The European Union, through the EU-Turkey deal, established that "all new irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving from Turkey to the Greek islands and whose applications for asylum have been declared inadmissible should be returned to Turkey" (European Parliament, 2024, p. 1). The deal presumes that Turkey is a "safe third country," implying that Turkey is a safe place for migrants and refugees to be sent. This externalization of migration controls and cooperation between countries aims to stop the flow of irregular migration to Europe via Turkey.

## E. Authoritarian tendencies and migration in Lebanon: power struggles and political instability

Lebanon has been frequently referred to by scholars as an example of a consociational democracy in MENA (Nahas Calfat, 2018). It is unique in that Lebanon is made up of many different religious sects and groups and ensures representation for its officially recognized religious communities. Nevertheless, according to Freedom House, Lebanon is now classified as a country that is "partly free" (Freedom House, 2024b). The Democracy Index 2023 categorizes Lebanon as "authoritarian" according to indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

Lebanon's independence, declared in 1941, did not provide political stability in the country. Various factors and forces played a major role in the country's inability to achieve a fully peaceful environment. Although the Beirut democratic system was based on power-sharing between ethnic and religious groups, Lebanese Christians and Muslims—including Sunnis, Shiites, and Druzes—have always had more decision-making rights (Bonesh, 2022). In Lebanon, traditional leaders, military veterans, former militia leaders, and wealthy businesspeople dominate the political system. Under the power-sharing system,

opposition groups do not function as political opposition and struggle in advocating for human rights. The consolidation of power among political elites also hampers competition within parties. Additionally, the delicate power-sharing among different sects in Lebanon's political system and the wars in the region, particularly the Syrian civil war, have deeply inhibited Lebanon's stability (Ebrem, 2021).

Lebanon's political system limits competition and impedes the rise of cross-communal or broad civic parties. According to Freedom House (2022a), "while residents enjoy some civil liberties and media pluralism, they also suffer from pervasive corruption and major weaknesses in the rule of law" (n.p.). Some actors in Lebanon are not democratically accountable, including "entrenched patronage networks, religious institutions, the heavily armed militias of sectarian factions such as Hezbollah, and competing foreign powers" (Freedom House, 2024b, n.p.). These groups use financial incentives and intimidation to influence Lebanese voters and politicians.

The main dynamics in the country's shift toward authoritarianism are the lack of free and fair elections, abuse and violations of civil liberties, lack of independent judiciary, and widespread censorship. Additionally, Human Rights Watch's World Report shows that the human rights situation in Lebanon deteriorated further in 2023 due to its economic crisis and "with a noticeable uptick in prosecutions for critical speech, growing restrictions against refugees and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and continued impunity for previous abuses" (HRW, 2024, n.p.). In 2021, the United Nations indicated that more than 80 percent of the country's residents did not have access to basic rights, including health, education, and an adequate standard of living, such as adequate housing and electricity (HRW, 2022a, n.p.).

The economic crisis fueled mass protests that challenged the legitimacy of the ruling regime and Lebanon's rent-seeking groups and a corrupt system affiliated with the political and economic elite (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022a). Additionally, since the turn of the century, the political party and militant group Hezbollah has become an important factor in the current system, dominating security operations in South Lebanon and "at times also threaten(ing) security of people" (p. 7).

Lebanon's media and government have shown signs of restricting and censoring journalists. The government has encouraged the media

to censor itself. This is not shocking considering that "journalists and activists have suffered from judicial and extrajudicial repression, while protesters have been routinely subjected to violence from state agents, and militias connected to ruling parties" (El Houri, 2021, n.p.).

Lebanon is both a country of major immigration and emigration (De Bel-Air, 2017), and it hosts one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita worldwide (UNHCR, 2024a). It ranks second (to the island of Aruba) as having the highest ratio of refugees to the native population (Karasapan & Shah, 2021). The Lebanese government estimates that there are 1.5 million Syrian refugees—1 million documented by UNHCR—living in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2024a). About 89 percent of the Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2020). These households are living on less than half the Lebanese minimum wage, or an estimated 36 US dollars per month (Karasapan & Shah, 2021). Sizeable displaced Palestinian and Iraqi communities reside in Lebanon, with approximately 490,000 Palestinian refugees in the country (UNRWA, 2023). Meanwhile, a 2021 report by the Beirut-based research center Information International shows the number of Lebanese emigrants was 17,721 in 2020 and 79,134 in 2021 (Sheikh Moussa, 2022).

This large population of non-citizens in the country "remain[s] subject to legal constraints and societal attitudes that severely restrict their access to employment, freedom of movement, and other fundamental rights" (Freedom House, 2022a, n.p.). There are no codified refugee rights in Lebanon. Rather, there is a memorandum of understanding between the Lebanese Directorate of General Security and UNHCR, signed in 2003, authorizing UNHCR to determine asylum claims and confirming the issuance of temporary residence permits. The 1962 Law Regulating the Entry and Stay of Foreigners in Lebanon and their Exit from the Country regulates entry and exit, but has specific categories for legal status. The country has strict residency requirements that make it difficult for migrants to maintain legal status in the country, resulting in a heightened risk of exploitation and abuse as well as lessened access to education and healthcare (European Commission, n.d.). "Non-policy" and "strategic ambiguity" have characterized Lebanon's approach to governing migration. The cornerstone of such a divided country's response to migration has been a desire to send Syrian refugees back to their country (Stel, 2021).

## II. THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF MIGRATION AS AN AUTHORITARIAN AND ILLIBERAL TENDENCY

In general terms, instrumentalization involves making someone or something into an instrument for achieving a goal. In this section, we discuss how governments make migrants or migration into an instrument for achieving political, economic, or personal goals. This can involve skewing the narrative about certain societal problems to avoid accountability (authoritarian practice) or using migrants as a means to promote nationalism or xenophobia to exclude them from society and rally citizens against them (illiberal practice).

To understand the dimensions of the instrumentalization of migrants, we look at the ways political figures and their administrations dictate state-society relations, the tools they use to maintain power over people, and the methods they use to control political outcomes—all in the context of migration.

For the most part in authoritarian countries, "migration politics has shifted from immigration denial and partly informal migration policies based on private intermediaries towards politicized, state-centered and discursively neoliberal migration policies" (Natter & Thiollet, 2022, p. 1526). And this shift has led us to study the relationship between nationalist discourses and instrumentalization. Our attention was drawn as well to the discourses and approaches used to legitimize interest groups' sway over migrants. This discourse showed us the power of instrumentalization in attempting to legitimize the exploitation of migrants.

The instrumentalization of migration can be defined as the subjection of migrants to a political, economic, and social agenda.

Migration has been instrumentalized throughout history by states to push people across borders for nation-building, demographic engineering, colonization, market-entry, or ethnic cleansing (Fakhry, Parkes & Rácz, 2022). But lately, due in part to global financial crises like that of 2008-09 and the broader economic crisis linked to the pandemic, the instrumentalization of migrants and refugees as cheap workers has been most common. Migrants are used to fill a labor gap.

In addition, nationalist discourses can be used in the instrumentalization of migrants who are labeled as "enemies" and "dangerous," which legitimizes surveillance, building walls and fences, and hiring border guards and border security systems (Human Rights 360, 2021). Portraying migrants as a threat to national security often sparks a xenophobic climate within societies that serves to retain loyal voters of political parties, which are usually right-wing parties but can also be left-leaning ones that adopt anti-immigrant policies that instrumentalize migrants (Kopyciok & Silver, 2021). Xenophobia and contemporary voting behaviors interact when migrants are blamed for poor service delivery, a country's political turmoil, insecurity, unemployment, etc., which leads to tension between migrants and locals. This tension creates an ideal environment for governments to portray themselves as the protector of the country and its citizens, and to hide or avoid the country's structural problems.

Migration instrumentalization is a low-cost strategy for perpetrators. Migrants can be exploited by countries that have few other international strategic advantages, pushing people across borders to destabilize or coerce the target state (Fakhry, Parkes & Rácz, 2022). Within this theoretical framework, the best way to understand these strategies for instrumentalization is by reviewing some country examples that illustrate this tendency.

## A. Instrumentalization of migration to promote nationalism

The politicization of migration in a way that serves nationalism is one way that migration is instrumentalized. For instance, Turkey's narratives about Syrians are used to fuel nationalism by "asserting a continuity between Turkey and its past as an empire" (Jennequin, 2020, p. 2). In essence, nationalist discourse uses neo-Ottoman reasoning to accept

Syrians: President Erdoğan has said "Turkey is larger than Turkey. We cannot be imprisoned in 780,000 square kilometers. … Our brothers … may be outside our natural boundaries, but they are within the borders of our hearts" (p. 2). Another example is Venezuelan President Maduro's characterization of Venezuelan emigrants as anti-patriots by ignoring the legitimate reasons for their decision to leave the country. He reiterates that "they wanted to leave," disregarding and avoiding the reality that many people have left Venezuela out of absolute necessity for economic, medical, or other reasons (J. C. Mogollón González, personal communication, April 6, 2022).

In some cases, countries can use either the migrants residing there or migrants returning to their country of origin as a way to bolster their national identity. For instance, the Venezuelan government has tried to encourage Venezuelans to come back to the country with a "Back to the Homeland" plan, and it claims that half of those who left—or 300,000 people, according to Venezuelan national statistics—have returned. Maduro has urged emigrants: "Come to the homeland. This is the land of grace and opportunity. This is the land for work, study, and love. The best times are beginning to come little by little with hard work and effort" (Semana, 2021, n.p.).

In Colombia, an idea has emerged regarding the superiority of Colombians solely based on their nationality (El Tiempo, 2015). Normally this is used to differentiate a Colombian from a Venezuelan in Colombia. This sense of superiority justifies a claim for privilege, giving priority to Colombians in job opportunities, and fuels resentment of the provision of healthcare and other services to Venezuelans (Cifuentes, et al., 2020). Venezuelan migrants are instrumentalized as a means of substantiating this claim of superiority.

The discourse of one mayor in Turkey is also a good example of portraying migrants as outsiders from a nationalist perspective. This mayor was mocking Syrians, saying that they believe they have become Turks once they obtain Turkish citizenship. "You Syrians have crossed the line. You may become everything on this earth except Turks" (Amer, 2021, n.p.). The use of migrants as a tool to contribute to the image of a strong Turkey and a culture of gratitude was aimed at rallying both nationalism and electoral votes.

## B. Instrumentalizing migration for political and economic gain

Many people migrate because of poverty, political persecution, and political conflicts in search of a better life. One of the features of democratic regimes is their promise to ensure human rights, as everyone has the right to social benefits and is entitled to a life of dignity. But migration policy based on a lack of formal rights and decent work leads to situations of modern slavery and inequality for migrants. As mentioned before, this political suppression of rights is experienced in authoritarian regimes and also in countries with authoritarian or illiberal tendencies. These conditions and lack of legal protections can render migrants powerless.

Regimes' regional ambitions are decisive in determining the international migration policy of countries with authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. Migration crises can be used to obtain certain leverage in international relations at different levels. In Turkey, Erdoğan started a cross-border military operation called "Operation Olive Branch" against the Kurd-administered enclave of Efrin (or Afrin) in northern Syria, in 2018. This was an invasion that used Syrian migrants to intimidate the Kurds in Turkey and used the military against the Kurds in Syria to rally support around Erdoğan and his party (Ahval News, 2021) and to benefit from anti-Kurdish nationalism (Adar, 2018). The presidential spokesperson at the time stated that "the operation would continue until the three and a half million Syrians currently living in Turkey could go back home" (Diken, 2018, n.p.).

The weaponization of migrants is another type of instrumentalization in which migrants are used as "weapons for destabilizing the established order and national security" of another country (Forti, 2022, n.p.). This weaponization has given governments the ability to threaten uncontrolled migration as a form of blackmail, with migration being used as a weapon of political warfare (Democracy Digest, 2021). In Turkey's case, Turkish authorities have threatened to send migrants and refugees back to the European Union unless requested assistance is provided. The European Union has given financial aid in response to this threat, indicating that the weaponization of migrants by Turkey was successful (Hacaloğlu, 2019).

The EU-Turkey deal on migration, negotiated in 2015-2016, was a result of the threat of incoming migrants from Turkey. In that deal, Turkey committed itself to preventing migration flows to the European Union and agreed that "all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey" (Jennequin, 2020, p. 4). This agreement has contributed to the Turkish government's bargaining power and profit. The Turkish government has paved the way for further uses of the weaponized refugee by negotiating "benefits for Turkish citizens such as the lifting of visa requirements, the promise of re-energization of the accession to the EU process, and the allocation of €6 billion [euros] in aid to alleviate the burden derived from the welcoming of the Syrian refugees" (Jennequin, 2020, p. 4). This type of externalization "dehumanizes refugees, commodifying human lives as aid packages and bargaining chips for foreign policy" (Bor, 2024, n.p.).

Governments also use policies and a change in narratives to reduce international pressure to respect human rights. For instance, one characteristic of the Mexican government's narrative is its focus on "rescues" rather than "detentions." Instead of using "detention centers," the administration calls them "shelters." Instead of "deportations," it uses the term "voluntary returns." Or, to give another example, Syrians in Turkey have been conceptualized as "guests," "Muslim brothers and sisters," or "victims of war" by the state, as opposed to migrants or refugees. This rhetoric serves the governments' aim of legitimizing their migration policy in the eyes of international human rights organizations and protecting their reputation.

Some governments avoid the topic of migration and migrants' rights, treating the population as invisible, which is reflected in the lack of a comprehensive policy for the migrant population. The Venezuelan government has consistently denied the existence of an exodus of Venezuelan nationals. The president of the National Constituent Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, even referred to pictures of Venezuelan migrants as being "staged." He said, "doesn't it seem suspicious to you that there are photos in Peru [of Venezuelans] walking along the side of the road? In Ecuador, in Colombia [...] it looks like that was 'lights, camera, action.' They get them off the buses, they do not let them ride and leave them anywhere, they have no choice (but to walk) and that is the shot they take" (El Periódico, 2020, n.p.).

Additionally, in some cases, officials use migrants for their direct benefit. In Colombia, migration officials take advantage of migrants passing through by holding onto their Venezuelan passports and then demanding ransom to return them. "[I]n the case of women, passports can be retained for the sake of sexual favors. It is important to note that, in the context of a migratory crisis and the vulnerability of people fleeing Venezuela, passports are the most valuable and useful good someone can hold and, therefore, a mechanism of power and control" (García Pinzón & Mantilla, 2020, p. 272).

The economic instrumentalization of the migrant population mainly involves the economic exploitation of migrant workers. Keeping them in limbo between documented or undocumented, legal or illegal, informal or formal, contributes to keeping migrant laborers under control as cheap labor through intentionally precarious immigration status (Gordon, 2009).

In Lebanon, migration policy can be characterized as ambiguous and incomplete. Entry and residency regulations are vague and restrictive. This leaves room for the arbitrary implementation of such policies (Stel, 2021). Many migrants and even Lebanese people describe their experience with immigration laws in Lebanon as feeling "trapped in a bureaucratic maze they do not know how to navigate" (p. 4), creating a precarious situation for migrants. Most of the Syrians in Lebanon do not have a legal residence permit due to the high cost of obtaining one. The proportion of Syrians without a legal residence permit was 74 percent at the end of 2018 (Yassin, 2018, p. 52). And this irregular migration status makes them vulnerable, which benefits the economic elites. While less than 1 percent of Syrian migrants in Lebanon have a work permit, those with a permit can only work in the agriculture, construction, and cleaning sectors (Yassin, 2018, p. 53). In addition, because of their irregular migration status, when they find a job, they are hired without a contract and therefore without any benefits, so the employer sets the salary, which in many cases is below the legal wages that a Lebanese person would receive. In order to prevent this situation, in 2015 the Lebanese Ministry of Labor established conditions for Lebanese employers to employ a Syrian national. This policy requires an employer to clearly show that only a Syrian is able to do the job they are filling, not a Lebanese person. This essentially blocked the way for Syrian migrants and refugees to work legally (Tınaz, 2017).

Thus, generally, highly skilled migrants and refugees are only allowed to carry out low-skilled work (Pinedo Caro, 2020). Also, the combination of host countries' migration policy and economic hardship provides the opportunity for business owners to take advantage of the skills and experience of migrants. According to a report on the situation of Syrian workers in Turkey, approximately 91 percent of these workers were employed informally and 80 percent were in the sectors of trade, construction and manufacturing (Pinedo Caro, 2020).

In Colombia, due to the dynamics of the country's labor market, a large proportion of migrants has no choice but to rely on informal work. This population is also vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment into armed groups, street gangs, or sex work-related industries. Venezuelan migrants have also been integrated into illegal markets such as drug production (La Opinión, 2019). Venezuelan migrants work longer hours and earn less money than Colombian employees working the same job. Many of them do not even earn the monthly minimum wage, which amounts to 1 million Colombian pesos (approximately 250 US dollars), and 7.4 percent earn less than 350,000 Colombian pesos (approximately 100 US dollars) per month (León, 2022).

## C. Using "migrants" as a scapegoat

Politicians and government officials have used migrants as scapegoats in a bid to contribute to their electoral gains, support their nationalist discourse, or cover up real responsibility in terms of economic and political turmoil. Migrants can turn into the main item on the political agenda, especially in times of crisis. Migration can be the perfect tool for politicians who use it to redirect people's anger toward this population instead of toward the politicians who have been unable to address their concerns. This instrumentalization can focus society's anger on refugees, as it did in the case of Turkey, using anti-immigrant sentiment as the glue that keeps citizens together (Civicus, 2022a).

As the Turkish government continues to use the existence of Syrian refugees as an electoral card and an excuse for economic failures, this instrumentalization causes migrants to live in fragile conditions amid strained relations. As an example, one of the major campaign promises that Binali Yildirim—a mayoral candidate for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2019—made to gain votes was

to deport Syrians who caused trouble (Cupolo, 2019). This discourse is also used by parties claiming to be social democrats (Ataman, 2019).

Similarly, in Lebanon, deportation policies seem to represent instrumentalization by the government in several ways. First, the government can win over public opinion by deporting migrants at will (Chaaban, et al., 2018). It also will specifically target active migrant workers for deportation "to distract the public opinion about the government's inability to tackle the issue of Syrian refugees" (p. 11). Meanwhile, the government continues to shift the responsibility for protecting and guaranteeing the rights of refugees to UNHCR and other NGOs.

Scapegoating migrants for social ills, unemployment, and a lack of service delivery has served to motivate outbreaks of xenophobic violence in certain contexts (Ueda, 2020). The reason for this discontent and aporophobia against migrants sometimes stems from the perception that migrants have easier or better access to social services, healthcare, financial aid, and economic opportunities than citizens of the receiving country. Several examples of xenophobic violence from Turkey include attacks against Syrians and anti-Syrian rhetoric (Simsek, 2015; Gürsel, 2017). In one case, false rumors spread that a Syrian male had harassed a local girl, and so Turkish community members decided to ransack a few Syrian-run stores (Cupolo, 2019).

Or, as in Mexico's case, the characterization of the migrant flows through Mexico as a "crisis" allows the government to focus on solving the migrant "problem" rather than addressing other human rights issues in the country. It also allows the government to use emergency powers to control migration and avoid human rights and due process protections (D. Villamar Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2022). For instance, since 2006, Mexico has had 300,000 civilian deaths by killings and paramilitary violence (exceeding the combined number of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same period), and over 61,000 people are estimated to have been forcibly disappeared. Mexican governments have continuously downplayed and manipulated these statistics (Pérez-Bustillo, 2021).

Migrants are not only accused of causing economic and political turmoil. They have often been scapegoated for endangering native populations. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new way for countries to

instrumentalize migration. When the pandemic hit, and about 150,000 Venezuelans returned to Venezuela in 2020-2021, these returnees experienced negative treatment by their government (HRW, 2022b). The Venezuelan authorities painted them as people responsible for the propagation of COVID-19 in Venezuela and called them "bioterrorists" (Posado, 2021). They were sent to quarantine centers with unsafe conditions, which included abuse perpetrated by Venezuelan authorities (HRW, 2022b).

## III. THE SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION AS AN AUTHORITARIAN AND ILLIBERAL TENDENCY

In international relations, "securitization" refers to the process by which states determine national security threats based on subjective assessments of perceived danger rather than an objective one (Kilroy, 2018). "According to securitization theory, states which perceive threats to national security will 'securitize' those sectors by taking measures to enhance their security, often without public debate and democratic process" (Abstract). In many cases in the migration context, these measures are indeed exceptional and not submitted to democratic processes.

In this section, we discuss the relationship of authoritarianism and state security policy with human rights and migration. "Many democratic governments invoke perceived threats to national border security from irregular migrants as legitimate grounds for pursuing border-control policies outside the constraints of normal democratic standards, while opposition groups decry these political moves as illegitimate restrictions on democratic rule" (Lenard & Macdonald, 2021, p. 372).

As noted earlier in this text, one authoritarian tendency lies in conducting government duties in a constant state of exception. When this tendency comes into play with migration, we notice the following results: migration is framed as a national security issue; borders are militarized; and migrants are portrayed as criminals or threats. Indeed, "[t]he stickiest negative narratives about migration are often interwoven with perceived threats to security (for instance, anxiety about jobs and resources, crime, or about changes to culture or social norms), even if these threats are not well supported by data. Threats

to personal safety and security or economic livelihoods can be highly destabilizing, even if they are episodic or only affect a small number of people—and these fears are not easily defused with contrary evidence" (Banulescu-Bogdan, Malka & Culbertson, 2021, p. 3).

Some examples of the securitization of migration policy include the "Facilitation of Data Communication between authorities; Extension of the definition of infringements, possibilities for prosecution and punishments; Facilitation of deportation for illegal immigrants and for long-term residents; Withdrawal of citizenship or residence permission; [and] Strengthening of controls on access to the territory and to membership" (Fauser, 2006, p. 7). Using examples from the countries studied in this report, we will highlight some tendencies in the securitization of migration that seem connected with authoritarian or illiberal justifications and policies.

## A. Migration as a national security issue

The securitization of migration has turned the phenomenon of migrants' presence into a national security threat (Ortega Velázquez, 2020). This discourse is centered around fear and enemies. Migrants with an irregular migration status have been characterized in particular as dangerous, threatening, and disorderly. Governments have used this characterization to justify an increase in border controls and police and military powers.

In recent years, the political debate on migration and refugee crises has gradually turned into a security issue as opposed to one of human rights or international law (Adamson, 2006). Although this view of migration is not new, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center—in which the perpetrators had trained and prepared in the United States—caused a massive shift in US migration policy and re-emphasized migration and security concerns worldwide (Adamson, 2006). Under this perspective, the collective body's right to security becomes more important than freedom or rights for individuals (Fauser, 2006). This has occurred in the United States and around the world, restricting migration as a preventative measure. The concept of security encompasses physical safety, but also protection from economic and social deprivation, both now and in the future (Lenard & Macdonald, 2021).

The Lebanese government and international organizations tend to characterize migration in Lebanon as a security issue. Essentially, they argue that "a lack of border control brings about an increase in illegal migration, thereby compromising the security and stability of the country" (Chaaban, et al., 2018, p. 8). With no programs in place to assist migrants who are marginalized by the current lack of framework, even groups like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) agree that security concerns are somewhat justified (Chaaban, et al., 2018). Thus, since October 2014, the Lebanese government has continued to restrict its legal framework on migration for national security reasons. For instance, Syrians need a valid identity document, a temporary visa, and to pay 200 US dollars to apply for a residence permit (Müller-Funk, 2021). "This legal framework has resulted in a situation in which a vast number of Syrians lack valid residence permits and work in irregular conditions. Without a valid permit, migrants and refugees are considered to be in breach of the law—and thus may be detained by the security forces and forcibly returned to Syria" (p. 2314).

In Mexico, migration policy is also approached from a national security perspective, affecting requirements for migrants who travel in the country. Transit through Mexico has become more difficult due to security measures such as requiring an identity document in order to buy a bus ticket. In airports, migration officials are known to act with impunity and without transparency, not letting certain people in, and potentially racially profiling travelers (X. Ortiz, personal communication, March 24, 2022; D. Villamar Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

## B. Securitizing the border

"No continent has been spared from the reinforcement and fortification of borders, which has come to define the beginning of the 21st century" (Vallet, 2022, n.p.). Over 70 border walls exist, most constructed in the past 20 years, and more continue to be built. The purpose of walls at borders has shifted over time; in the past, they aimed to prevent enemies from entering in scenarios of conflict, whereas now they seek to keep certain individuals and goods out of the country (Vallet, 2022).

Personnel, usually part of the military, also play a role in securitizing the border.

This militarization has been linked "to dehumanisation of migrant others and to the increasing mortality in border spaces" (Jones & Johnson, 2016). Although this is a trend adopted by both democratic and authoritarian regimes, the dramatic increase in border militarization is seen as an exceptional measure, consistent with the view that this shift constitutes an authoritarian tendency. Additionally, "viewing border governance solely as a national security issue, and borders as zones of exemption from human rights obligations can lead to unfavourable human rights outcomes" (OHCHR, 2021). These negative human rights outcomes are predominantly borne by migrants at the border.

That is exactly what has happened in Mexico. Militarization has dominated its border policy, which is focused on the containment and repression of migrant flows. Over 15,000 Mexican security forces have been deployed at its borders. Migration officials are known to depart regularly from human rights standards and due process guarantees (D. Villamar Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2022). In one incident, Mexican border soldiers killed a Guatemalan migrant at a Chiapas border checkpoint (Pérez-Bustillo, 2021). In another egregious case, in January 2021 near the US-Mexico border, a group of US-trained Mexican police massacred 19 Guatemalan migrants, 16 of whom were from Guatemala's indigenous Maya Mam communities (Lindsay-Poland, 2021).

Conflict along the Turkey-Syria border has led it to become "a site of tension between various actors competing for influence along its length—and has emerged as one of the most heavily militarized areas in the Middle East" (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022). Turkey built a concrete wall along 764 kilometers (475 miles) of its border with Syria, installing lights and cameras there for surveillance. At that point, the border was effectively closed to all asylum seekers. In 2019, one border crossing was opened. However, migrants continue to have to climb the wall, bribe border guards, and resort to using smugglers (Asylum in Europe, 2023).

The "Evros frontier"—or the Evros River, which divides Turkey and Greece—has become a militarized zone or "no-man's-land" to prevent migrants from crossing into Greece. "In one year, Greece, and the EU, have invested millions of euros to build a border fortress:

barbed wire walls have sprung up along the river, and sound cannons as well as military equipment such as drones were installed to prevent a new influx of migrants through the Evros" (Boitiaux, 2021, n.p.). Around 850 soldiers patrol this border. They carry out illegal pushbacks of migrants to Turkey. Meanwhile, non-governmental civil society organizations are unable to access this militarized zone and provide support to migrants there. These types of pushbacks are happening at other Turkish borders with Europe as well. This demonstrates that both democratic and authoritarian regimes are using similar tactics to deal with migration, all within an exceptional state of affairs.

## C. Portraying migrants as threats and criminals

The transition from a human rights perspective to a security perspective also facilitates the shift from an understanding of a migrant as a subject of rights to an understanding of a migrant as a potential criminal or terrorist, resulting in bias against migrant minority groups (Ullah, et al., 2020). The security paradigm, which argues that the law can be suspended "when necessary," reduces migrants to a threat, leaving violent migration frameworks as the mechanism of control.

The term "illegal migrant" has been used in the securitization discourse. As such, if someone is characterized as "illegal" or "irregular," it implies that they violated the norms of the sovereign state's territorial integrity. In this context, an "irregular migrant" represents a transnational, clandestine entity that evades surveillance and that security agencies seek to control (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022). Additionally, in reporting crimes that have occurred, security forces tend to mention the presumed culprit's place of origin, which is considered necessary identifying information. But levels of xenophobia tend to increase in response to this type of news (A. Villaseñor de la Vega, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

There is an unfounded belief that immigrants commit more crime than host community members and that immigration creates insecurity in some segments of society. Research has found the opposite. For instance, one study carried out by the Migration Policy Institute and the Brookings Institution in September 2020 analyzes the relationship between migration and the impact on crime rates in Colombia, Peru, and Chile (Bahar, Dooley & Selee, 2020). This report concludes that

Venezuelan citizens, compared proportionally with the host population, commit fewer crimes. This means that the migration of people from Venezuela does not have a significant or forceful impact on the deterioration of citizen security in those three countries, which shows that the public perception of an increase in crime due to migrants is wrong. In Chile, Venezuelan migrants who represent 2.4 percent of the population accounted for just 0.7 percent of criminal indictments. In Colombia, Venezuelan nationals are 3.2 percent of the population, and the evidence on violent crimes showed they only represented 2.3 percent of arrests in 2019 (Bahar, Dooley & Selee, 2020).

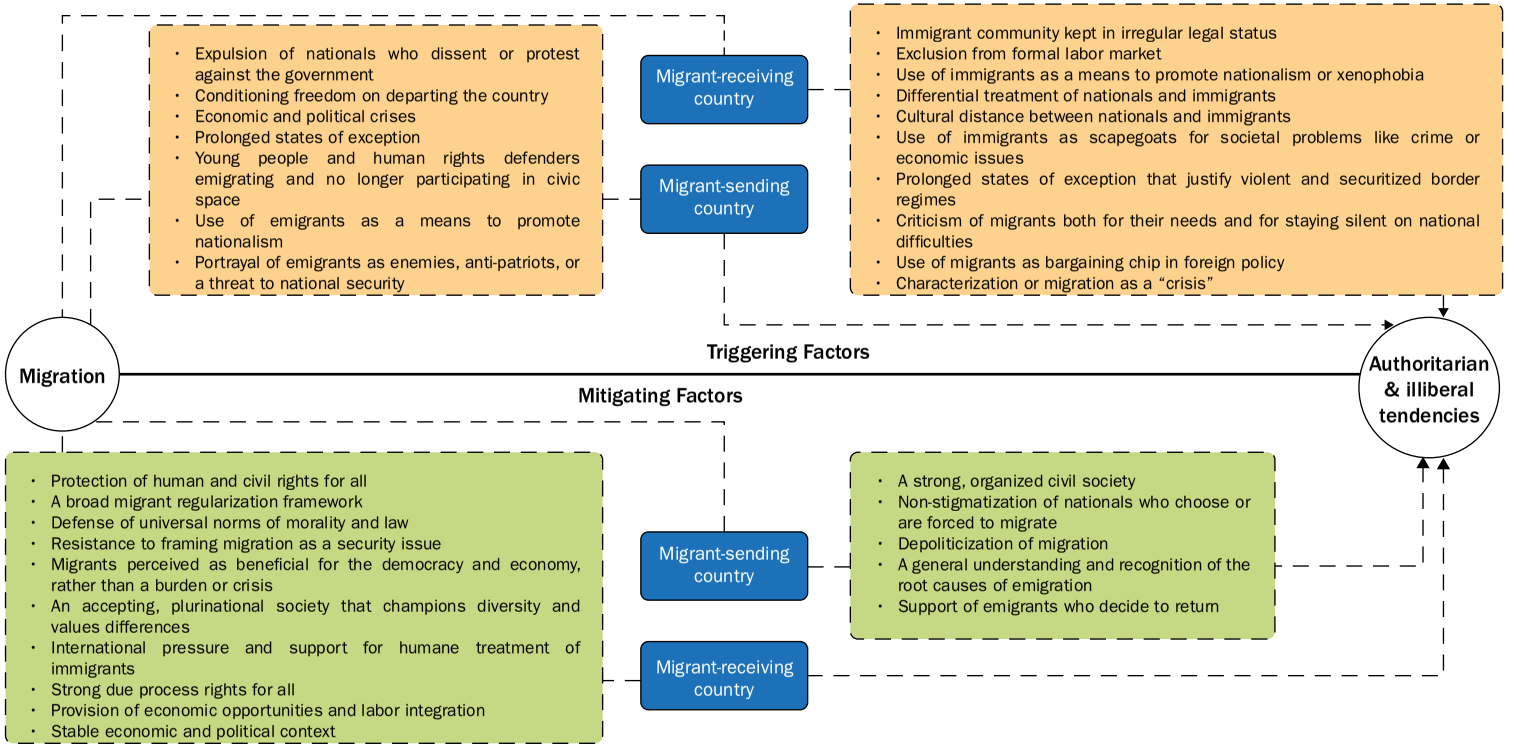
Another example of the securitization of migration controls is how administrative migration institutions in Mexico "have been increasingly empowered to restrict the personal liberty of migrants, thus becoming similar to penal institutions" (Campesi, 2012, p. 3, as cited in Ortega Velázquez, 2020, p. 5). The migration control regime could qualify as both administrative and criminal, but without the guarantees that come with the criminal justice system (Ortega Velázquez, 2020). One securitization measure is the use of so-called migration alerts that flag certain foreigners to migration officials as a threat to the state. These are not public and can severely limit the mobility of the people named in the alerts (D. Villamar Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

## IV. KEY FINDINGS ON MIGRATION AND AUTHORITARIAN AND ILLIBERAL TENDENCIES

Through this exercise of contemplating the relationship between authoritarian and illiberal tendencies and migration, we found several connections worth highlighting. First, it is clear that these concepts and realities are interrelated: authoritarian tendencies affect migration, and vice versa.

To demonstrate this interrelationship, we decided to present our findings in a diagram shown in Figure 1. This diagram presents what we found in our case studies: there are factors that trigger illiberal or authoritarian tendencies in response to migration, and there are factors that mitigate illiberal or authoritarian tendencies in response to migration. These factors differ depending on whether one looks at countries that receive large flows of migrants ("migrant-receiving countries," such as Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon) or countries with large flows of migrants leaving ("migrant-sending countries," such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico). Below the figure, we explain these factors and how they trigger or mitigate authoritarian or illiberal tendencies in response to migration.

**Figure 1. Illiberal and Authoritarian Tendencies in Response to Migration: Triggering and Mitigating Factors**




**Note:** Prepared by the authors.

## A. Triggering factors of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies

### *1. Migrant-receiving countries*

The category where we identified the most factors influencing authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in response to migration was triggering factors in migrant-receiving countries. There are many factors that seem to instigate illiberal or authoritarian responses when migrants arrive in a country. Findings for this category came from the cases of Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon, all of which receive large flows of migrants.

We identified the following factors as entrenching or eliciting authoritarian and illiberal responses to migration. First, when the immigrant community is kept in an irregular status or excluded from the labor market, this can result in less integration of its members and backlash against them for having an irregular status. Additionally, differential treatment of immigrants and nationals, where nationals are prioritized, can result in further illiberal and authoritarian tendencies toward migrants, such as xenophobia, and can be used as a means of promoting nationalism.

Cultural distance between nationals and immigrants exacerbates these tendencies, as does the use of migrants as scapegoats for societal problems like crime and economic difficulties. The dual criticism of migrants both for their needs and for staying silent on national issues is another way migrants are demonized. In addition, the characterization of migration as a "crisis" may result in prolonged states of exception that justify violent and securitized border regimes. Such regimes are illiberal and dangerous for migrants. Finally, the use of migrants as bargaining chips in foreign policy serves to dehumanize them, providing fertile ground for violations of their human rights.

### *2. Migrant-sending countries*

In this category, we observe factors that seem to trigger illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in migrant-sending countries. The sole example we studied for this was Venezuela, limiting our results. However, there are still findings we were able to observe.

In Venezuela's case, illiberal and authoritarian tendencies were exacerbated toward emigrants by the following factors. The expulsion of nationals who dissented or protested against the government limited opposition and painted emigration as anti-patriotic. Additionally, conditioning people's freedom from imprisonment on their leaving the country further entrenches the idea that emigration is for traitors and enemies. This rhetoric can be used as a means of bolstering nationalism. The portrayal of returning migrants as a threat to national security, as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, legitimizes prolonged states of exception.

Economic and political crises constitute other aggravating factors. These crises force young people and human rights defenders to emigrate, lessening their participation in protests and in civil society.

## B. Mitigating factors of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies

### *1. Migrant-receiving countries*

In the migrant-receiving countries we studied (Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon), not all responses to migration were illiberal or authoritarian in nature. In fact, countries like Colombia have been praised globally for their reception and integration of migrants. Here, we identify some of the factors that may help mitigate illiberal and authoritarian responses to migration. In many cases, these factors are the opposite of the above triggering factors.

The mitigating factors that we identified tend to lead to more democratic responses and protection of immigrants. The first is strong legal and practical protection of human and civil rights for all, irrespective of nationality. This helps ensure that immigrants' due process and other basic rights are respected. Additionally, a society that is accepting of other cultures and plurinational, valuing differences, can push against illiberal and authoritarian tendencies.

Further, reframing migration as beneficial to the democracy and economy as opposed to being a security issue, helps countries distance themselves from violent border regimes. Arguments framed from a defense of universal norms of morality and law can contribute to a positive migration policy environment. International pressure to respect

universal human rights and ensure humane treatment of migrants could also be a mitigating factor.

Finally, a stable economic and political context can lead to less authoritarian and illiberal backlash against immigrants. If immigrants are provided economic opportunities and integrated into the labor market, they are more able to sustain themselves and contribute to society. This can lead to them receiving better treatment both politically and socially.

### *2. Migrant-sending countries*

Lastly, we found the fewest factors related to mitigating authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in response to emigration. This is likely because we did not focus on migrant-sending countries and their relationship with their emigrant and diaspora community. The primary example in our study is Venezuela and its treatment of Venezuelan emigrants, which has been predominantly negative. But Colombia and Mexico also have a large share of their populations emigrating to other countries, so they can serve as examples in this category as well.

From these examples, we can deduce that the following are mitigating factors. A strong, organized civil society that is able to counteract authoritarian and illiberal tendencies by the state is important. Additionally, depoliticizing migration and promoting a general understanding and recognition of the root causes of emigration serves to lessen the demonization of emigrants as anti-patriotic. This also helps curb the stigmatization of nationals who choose, or are forced, to emigrate. A final mitigating factor is government policy that supports emigrants who decide to return, helping them reintegrate into and benefit the society.

To conclude, these findings regarding triggering and mitigating factors in receiving and sending countries serve to illustrate the connection between migration and authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. We hope this study serves as a starting point for theorizing the relationship between these concepts. Ultimately, our hope is that this information will contribute to lessening authoritarian and illiberal responses to migration and to greater protection of migrants' and refugees' human rights.

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# WORKING PAPERS 13

## The Intersection of Migration with Authoritarian and Illiberal Tendencies. Contextualized in Latin America and the Middle East

Democratic and authoritarian governments alike may respond to migrant flows with authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. These practices tend to negatively impact the inclusion, protection, and humane treatment of migrants. We view this as a problem; migration or the movement of people is a reality, and the response to this reality is a choice that countries are faced with constantly. We wish to better understand the factors that trigger or mitigate these authoritarian and illiberal responses to migration. This exploratory, theoretical study engages with the nuance of both migration and authoritarian tendencies to provide a wide and conversation-starting introduction to the intersection of these topics.

For this research, we focus on Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with examples from Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon. These two regions are currently experiencing major migration crises. Our study aims to contribute to the conversation and debate about the ways in which countries respond with authoritarian or illiberal tendencies to migrant flows into, out of, or through them. Our guiding questions include: How are migration flows revealing and provoking authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in countries with different levels of democratic development? What are the illiberal and authoritarian tendencies that we observe in the responses to migrant flows of countries with differing levels of democracy? What are the authoritarian and illiberal practices that contribute to migrants' low acceptance and integration in destination countries? What factors trigger, or mitigate, these tendencies in both receiving and sending countries? These questions help us explore the relationship between migration and authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. Our findings identify certain factors that we believe either trigger or mitigate such tendencies.