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Keeping in transit: flexible externalization and the dual logics of transit governance in the Americas

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This article examines how irregularized migrant transit has become a central tool of contemporary migration governance in the Americas. Drawing on the empirical trajectories of Venezuelan migrants crossing multiple countries under precarious and shifting conditions, the article argues that transit is not merely tolerated or obstructed, but strategically instrumentalized by states and other actors to govern mobility. The analysis of policies such as visa restrictions, bilateral agreements, the instrumental use of administrative permits, and the discretionary application of the law shows that these devices generate prolonged and fragmented mobility. Far from reflecting a failure of migration policies, the findings indicate that the persistence of migrant transit constitutes a functional outcome of a pragmatic governance architecture, embedded in dynamics of flexible externalization and sustained by both state and non-state actors. This regional framework operates under a dual logic: while in the corridor crossing northern South America and Central America transit is promoted as a mechanism to evade reception and protection responsibilities (a pragmatic *laissez-passer* logic), in Mexico it is used to hinder progress through bureaucratic circuits and indefinite waiting periods (a *chutes and ladders* logic). Through a multilevel approach that links governmental and other actors' strategies with migrants' trajectories, the article contributes to the literature on the intersection between transit and migration governance in Latin America by empirically conceptualizing transit as a functional component of the regional governance of mobility.

KEYWORDS

irregularized transit, flexible externalization, migration governance, mobility control, migration regimes, migrant trajectories, Venezuelan migration

1 Introduction

Migration governance in the Americas has undergone a significant shift in recent years. In a context of increasingly restrictive migration policies, transit is no longer conceived as a temporary stage between departure and arrival, but has emerged as a structurally reproduced condition, marked by legal ambiguity, containment, and uncertainty. Irregularized migrant transit, particularly of Venezuelan nationals, has become central to this shifting landscape (Álvarez Velasco, 2017, 2022, 2021; Domenech and Dias, 2020; Domenech, 2022; Domenech et al., 2022; Gandini, 2024; Alba, 2024; Trabalón, 2024; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha, 2025). Far from being a side effect of migration controls, transit is actively shaped and instrumentalized by states and other actors through a complex web of migration governance (Méndez Barquero, 2021; Alba Villalever and Schütze, 2021; Gandini et al., 2024; Achilli, 2024).

This article examines how migrant transit is configured and governed across the Americas[1], and analyzes the ways and effects through which states and other actors along the migration corridor instrumentalize irregularized transit as a mechanism of governance. Drawing on the empirical trajectories of Venezuelan migrants who cross multiple countries under precarious and shifting conditions, as well as on a complementary set of interviews conducted at different points along the corridor, the article argues that irregularized migrant transit in the Americas is not a collateral effect of migration policies, but rather a functional outcome of a contemporary form of governance that I call *flexible externalization*. This regional governance configuration combines restrictive tools with permissive practices in order to sustain transit while preventing migrants from settling or obtaining secure status.

Regional governance is characterized by a pragmatic, polycentric architecture in which states and diverse actors co-administer mobility without resolving it. Through the combination of two complementary logics, one of *laissez-passer*, which has facilitated movement northward to prevent settlement, and another of *chutes and ladders*, which disperses, delays, and recycles mobility within national territory, the countries along the corridor systematically reproduce the condition of transit. This strategy not only shifts states' responsibilities for protection and integration but also produces political and economic benefits: it has allowed governments to demonstrate cooperation with Northern countries, to exercise symbolic control over mobility, and to extract direct profits from transit.

The aim of the article is to show how this regime of transit governance is articulated, to identify its main mechanisms, and to analyze how it is experienced from the perspective of migrants' trajectories. By following Venezuelan migrants' routes longitudinally and complementing this tracking with interviews and documentary evidence, the article elucidates how transit is governed and reproduced as a regional practice that combines visa requirements, the instrumental use of migration bureaucracy through the creation of temporary transit permits, and the discretionary application of migration laws under a scheme that sustains fragmented and prolonged mobility without allowing either effective arrival or settlement. Although this strategy is implemented differently in Mexico and throughout the rest of the Latin American migration corridor, in no case does it offer durable, sustainable solutions. While in several South and Central American countries transit is promoted as a mechanism to avoid reception responsibilities and facilitate movement toward northern territories, in Mexico, it is reproduced through logics of territorial dispersion, administrative delay, and operational containment aimed at halting or discouraging further movement.

Following this introduction, the article begins with a Data and Methods section and then turns to a conceptual discussion of irregularized transit and migration governance. It then analyzes the broader regional context in which migrant transit has been reconfigured in the Americas. Drawing on dense empirical evidence, the transit trajectories of Venezuelan migrants enable the examination of the bureaucratic, political, and economic logics that govern their mobility. This analysis unfolds around two interrelated governance strategies, each addressed in a corresponding section. First, the article develops the notion of a pragmatic *laissez-passer* type of governance operating along the migration corridor that runs from northern South America to Central America, where transit is produced to prevent migrants from settling in national territories. Second, it analyzes the *chutes and ladders* governance strategy applied in Mexico, where transit is not reproduced to expel, but to immobilize, generating forms of forced presence.

2 Data and method

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted over the past 3 years at strategic nodes of the migration corridor in the Americas, including Metetí in Panama, the southern and northern borders of Mexico in Tapachula and Tijuana, and Mexico City. These locations were selected because they concentrate large numbers of people in transit, host shelters and humanitarian organizations that interact daily with Venezuelan migrants, and function as key bottlenecks and redistribution points within regional transit governance.

The central empirical strategy was the longitudinal reconstruction of the transit trajectories of six Venezuelan migrants, selected in Tijuana as strategic and information-rich cases, understood as analytically representative. They were chosen because they met three criteria. First, they had undertaken multi-country journeys with different legal and administrative statuses along the way. Second, they agreed to participate in repeated interviews over time. Third, their trajectories enabled detailed documentation of how shifting policies and practices shaped decisions, routes, and waiting times. Among them, five are men and one is a woman. This imbalance reflects both the continued predominance of men traveling alone in the nodes observed, even as migration has become increasingly family-based, and family dynamics that place men in the roles of spokespersons, managers of mobile phones, and custodians of personal documents, as shown in previous fieldwork (Gandini et al., 2020; Fernández de la Reguera et al., 2024). This limitation is acknowledged and will be considered, where relevant, in the interpretation of the findings.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish using a semi-structured guide focused on migration history, legal and administrative procedures in different countries, experiences with authorities and humanitarian actors, forms of waiting, and daily practices of movement and survival. With prior consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the material was systematized through thematic coding that combined deductive and inductive categories. All interviewees are identified with pseudonyms, including Osmar, Joaquín, Renny, Felipe, Alma, and Antonio. The interviews collected systematic information on age, family composition, educational level, and employment history, revealing a less selective profile than in the first arrivals of the contemporary Venezuelan displacement that began a decade ago

1 This article analyzes the configuration of irregularized migratory transit across the continent up until the period immediately preceding Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States in January 2025. At the time of writing, this dynamic is in a phase of relative containment or "stand-by," the course of which will depend on changes in U.S. migration policy under the new administration and their impact on the region.

(Gandini et al., 2019), with the presence of both professionals and people with low levels of schooling.

The trajectories were reconstructed through an iterative design that combined retrospective and prospective inquiry. From the first contact in Tijuana in March 2023, each journey was reconstructed retrospectively from the point of departure in Venezuela, including temporary stays in various Latin American countries, and was then followed up virtually and in person until December 2024. Four of the six interlocutors remain in contact, while communication with the other two was lost. These interruptions are themselves indicative of the instability and fragmentation that characterize transit. For each case, the reconstruction documented routes, means of transportation, payments and debts, interactions with officials and non-state actors, detentions, returns, episodes of waiting or immobility, and changes in legal status or perceptions of risk throughout the journey.

This strategy was complemented by 26 additional interviews with Venezuelan migrants in transit and 25 interviews with key actors from civil society actors (organizations, human rights defenders, shelter workers), international agencies, and government institutions. The interviews with migrants, conducted through purposive sampling in shelters and public spaces, allowed for triangulation and refinement of the patterns identified in the six central trajectories. For this reason, no direct references are included in the text, except for one specific case. Interviews with key actors provided institutional perspectives on policy implementation, bureaucratic discretion, and the changing role of different actors in transit governance. The information provided by these key actors is cited as KA interview. The analysis also incorporates document and policy review of decrees, official provisions, amendments to visa regulations, bilateral agreements on cooperation and transit, and official statistics on entries, transits, detentions, and deportations.

This qualitative and longitudinal strategy responds to recent calls to study migration journeys *in situ* and along the route, avoiding exclusive reliance on retrospective accounts that can be reconfigured "with the benefit of arrival." While previous studies on transit often relied on *post hoc* reconstructions (Collyer, 2010; León et al., 2015; Frank-Vitale, 2020), this research adopts a multisited and sequential approach inspired by debates on route ethnography (Brigden, 2018; Vogt, 2017; Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Frank-Vitale, 2020). In line with this literature and recognizing that it is not always necessary to move physically alongside migrants, the design combines multisited fieldwork with repeated encounters along the corridor, enabling the capture of how transit is governed and experienced across time and space without compromising participants' safety and autonomy.

3 Migrant transit and governance: rethinking categories, practices, and regimes

In recent years, migrant transit has ceased to be viewed as a brief and merely intermediate phase between the country of origin and the country of destination. It has been understood as an experiential state (Balaguera, 2018) and recognized as assuming dynamic and non-linear forms (Collyer and De Haas, 2012). Transit is not a linear movement; it is composed of staggered trajectories (*matryoshka journeys*) that combine mobility and immobility intersect across different moments and locations (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2016). It has become a prolonged, fragmented experience, often chronically stalled, marked by multiple returns, detentions, waiting periods, forced pauses, and temporary or undesired settlements (Alba Villalever and Schütze, 2021; Méndez Barquero, 2021; Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Spanger and Andersen, 2023; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha, 2025). This transformation requires a rethinking of traditional analytical frameworks and an understanding of transit as both an empirical and conceptual category, rather than a purely transitory or liminal moment.

In Latin America, irregularized migrant transit is not only part of the continent's new migration geography, but is actively reconfiguring its spatial, political, and social dynamics (Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha, 2025). This type of mobility, far from diminishing in the face of tightened border controls, has multiplied and diversified, giving rise to new routes, corridors, and circular patterns that cross multiple territories. These flows, driven by a combination of structural factors (conflict, violence, economic collapse, environmental disasters, and the reconfiguration of family networks) are intensified by the closure of regular mobility pathways (Domenech et al., 2022).

In response, predominant migration policies in the region have hardened control mechanisms. Paradoxically, these measures have not stopped movement; rather, they have made it more dangerous, prolonged, and costly, thereby fostering the irregularization of migratory trajectories (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016; Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Gandini, 2024). Instead of containing transit, these policies reconfigure it—transforming it into waiting, detention, and forced circularity. Irregularization is not an inherent "illegal" condition but the result of legal and political frameworks that push migrants into informal and unsafe routes (De Génova, 2002; Düvell, 2011). As Collyer (2010) and Hess (2010), Hess (2012) argue, this criminalizing narrative naturalizes the link between transit and illicit practices—such as human smuggling or the use of false documentation—thus reinforcing the legitimacy of securitization measures and the externalization of migration control (Zolberg, 1999).

From this perspective, it is essential to reclaim the concept of irregularized or illegalized migration as an institutionally produced and socially distributed process, rather than an objective or morally attributable condition (De Génova, 2002; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha, 2025). In this context, migrant transit must be understood as a form of mobility produced and managed by regional border regimes that not only seek to deter or halt movement but deliberately generate scenarios of immobility, detention, and prolonged precarity (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2016; Domenech and Dias, 2020; Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Rosas and Gil Araujo, 2022; Gandini, 2024; Spanger and Andersen, 2023).

In this article, regional migration regimes of irregularized transit do not refer to any single rule or policy, but rather to broad and relatively stable configurations of governance that have articulated *principles*, *norms*, *rules* and *decision-making procedures*, whether implicit or explicit, around the control and governance

of mobility and that have generated a certain convergence in the expectations of the actors involved (Krannich and Hunger, 2022; Krasner, 1983). Within this framework, *principles* refer to the beliefs that have oriented the regime, in particular the idea that migrant transit has been conceived by states as a functional mechanism to govern mobility and to produce political and economic gains, such that keeping migrants on the move, without settlement or a stable status, has been considered an effective form of governance.

In this approach, *norms* refer to the standards of behavior defined in terms of rights or obligations that have organized interactions among migrants, authorities and other actors. These norms have taken shape in the expectation that migrants continue their route even when they cannot enter regularly, do not claim permanence or international protection, and accept precarious mobility conditions as part of the transit experience. In this case, *rules* have materialized in specific prescriptions such as the requirement of visas for regular entry, the imposition of border and documentary controls, the establishment of fees and charges associated with transit, and the issuance of temporary safe-conduct passes, instruments that ultimately determine which actions are permitted, prohibited or required along the migratory corridor. Finally, *decision-making procedures* are expressed in the practices through which these norms and rules have been implemented, practices that, although restrictive in formal terms, have operated in contradictory ways in the day-to-day governance of transit. In this corridor, particularly between Colombia and Guatemala, even though visas and controls would prevent regular passage for Venezuelans (and other nationalities), in practice, both state and non-state actors have enabled onward movement through payments or temporary authorizations, whether formal or informal, that have allowed migrants to continue their journey.

The result in this regional migration regimes of irregularized transit has been the implementation of a *flexible externalization* and *laissez-passer strategy*, whereby transit is effectively allowed to proceed. Although the adjective "flexible" has occasionally been associated with externalization dynamics in recent scholarship, its use differs from the argument developed here. In Sylla and Schultz (2020), "flexible externalization" refers to the malleable use of development assistance within the European border externalization agenda. Vogt (2025), in turn, employs the term to describe the adaptive and multiscalar mechanisms (different devices, agreements, and moments) through which US border enforcement has been displaced into Mexico. In this article, I use flexible externalization to characterize a specific regime configuration in the Americas, one that combines restrictive tools with permissive practices to keep migrants on the move without settlement or secure status. In Mexico, the issuance of transit or exit permits that are later rejected by other authorities illustrates the discretionary and fragmented application of these provisions. This use of bureaucracy, along with other devices such as detention and release, has consolidated a *chutes-and-ladders strategy* in which transit is reproduced as a loop functional to its governance.

While Latin American scholarship has convincingly shown that migration regimes reproduce forms of control, criminalization, and externalization historically associated with the Global North, in this article, I propose a complementary perspective. Building on the four dimensions outlined above, I argue that, in the Americas, the regime of irregularized transit not only adapts those devices but reconfigures them through the instrumental use of transit itself. Rather than a regime based exclusively on control understood as containment or deterrence, it is a flexible configuration that combines restrictive mechanisms with more permissive, laissez-passer strategies that modulate movement without allowing settlement. In this way, transit becomes a structural component of the regime and a governance resource that generates political and economic benefits for transit states and intermediate destinations, as well as for a wide range of other actors.

This phenomenon is part of broader transformations in migration governance, characterized by the fragmentation of responsibilities and the proliferation of actors involved in managing transit. Rather than a state-centered model, contemporary governance of transit adopts a polycentric configuration in which multiple actors operate simultaneously: state agencies, international organizations, civil society groups, local economic actors, and illicit networks (Koinova, 2024; Geddes, 2020; Pécoud and Thiollet, 2023). This pragmatic architecture interweaves formal and informal norms, legal mechanisms, and para-state practices, generating what together with other colleagues, we have called termed as a "political economy of irregularized transit," structured by relationships of profit, control, coercion, and precarity (Gandini et al., 2024).

4 Transit in the spotlight: reshaping continental migration in the Americas

In the first decades of the 21st century, migration dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have undergone substantial transformations. Historically, the region was predominantly a sender of migrants to the Global North, especially to the United States. However, the progressive tightening of migration policies, including the reinforcement of the border wall, judicialized deportations, and family separation (Meneses, 2022), has altered traditional mobility patterns. As a result, several LAC countries began to consolidate themselves as receiving territories, particularly for nationals from within the region, turning LAC into an emerging migration destination (Gandini et al., 2020).

Between 2010 and 2024, LAC doubled its number of international migrants, increasing from 8.2 to 17.5 million (United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs Population Division, 2024). In line with the global trend of increasing forced migration, the Americas have also followed this pattern (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Venezuelan displacement has had a particularly significant impact in the region. With more than 7.8 million people displaced in less than a decade, it represents the largest exodus from LAC in recent times and has surpassed any other forced displacement globally (R4V, 2025). This intensification of flows has consolidated the LAC region as a hub of high intra-regional mobility, where new and persistent flows converge.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily interrupted these movements (Vera Espinoza et al., 2020), the reopening of borders amid multiple crises (health, economic, environmental, political, and security) reactivated displacements with renewed

dynamism (Zapata et al., 2022; Herrera Rosales, 2023; Selee et al., 2023; Feldmann and Sturino, 2024). The impact of these overlapping crises was felt not only by those who remained in their countries of origin but also by migrants already settled in other countries in the region.

Despite having consolidated itself in recent years as a region of reception, LAC faced serious challenges in integrating migrant populations under these conditions. Many people, including those undergoing migration regularization processes or asylum, opted to move again due to adverse conditions (Álvarez Velasco and Miranda, 2024). The partial or failed integration and limitations of social protection policies intensified the effects of the health crisis (Gandini et al., 2022; Vera Espinoza et al., 2021; Bojórquez-Chapela et al., 2023). Although signs of economic recovery were visible by late 2021, this trend reversed in 2022, due in part to the global impact of the war in Ukraine, which increased energy and food prices (Economic Commission for Latin America the Caribbean, 2022). This inflation disproportionately affected migrants and refugees, especially women and people with irregular status, such as many Venezuelans (RMNA, 2022). By the end of that year, it was estimated that nearly 75% of displaced Venezuelans in the region faced difficulties accessing food, housing, and formal employment (RMNA, 2022).

The convergence of multiple factors has rapidly reconfigured the directionality of mobility in the Americas, reestablishing the dominance of the historical South–North migration pattern (Gandini, 2024). As a result, a continental migration corridor has formed, characterized by the mass transit of people in irregular situations. In just a few years, the South American, Central American and Caribbean, and North American migration systems have merged, transforming the region connecting northern South America to Mexico into a central axis of hemispheric mobility (Feldmann and Sturino, 2024; Gandini et al., 2024; Álvarez Velasco and Cielo, 2023).

Transit migration has undergone significant changes over the past decade, emerging as a central feature of mobility in the Americas. The current pattern is characterized by large-scale, irregularized transit through corridors that cross multiple national borders. In addition to the drastic increase in the number of people in transit, the composition of these flows has also changed. These are mixed flows (Crisp et al., 2009), where people with different reasons for displacement converge, often at the threshold between forced and voluntary migration, and with international protection needs. In many cases, this constitutes survival migration (Betts, 2013) or distress migration (Bhabha, 2018; Freitez, 2019). Although transit is heterogeneous in terms of nationality, the predominance of Venezuelan migrants has been particularly notable over the past 3 years[2].

The exceptional scale of migration toward the U.S.–Mexico border in the post-pandemic period (2021–2024) prompted the development of new strategies in response to these mass displacements. In January 2022, Mexico imposed a tourist visa requirement on Venezuelans seeking to enter the country as visitors without authorization for paid activities, establishing conditions that were difficult to meet[3]. While at the beginning of the displacement, Venezuelans could travel to nearly all countries in the region, as of today, 21 out of 33 LAC countries require some form of visa for this population (Passport Index, 2024).

The imposition of the visa had an immediate effect. In February 2022, the number of Venezuelan air arrivals to Mexico dropped by 80% compared to the previous month. As a result, the total number of regular entries in 2022 was half that recorded in 2021. This trend continued through 2023 and 2024, confirming that the visa requirement significantly curtailed the use of air travel as an entry route. However, as shown in Figure 1, in 2022 irregular entry events surpassed for the first time the number of regular entries recorded the previous year, which, until then in 2021, had marked the highest peak since 2015, and in 2024 the record was broken again, with over 361,000 irregular entry events by Venezuelans registered.

The impact of the visa requirement was not limited to Mexico. In early 2022, Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica also imposed visa requirements for Venezuelan nationals, joining Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama, which had already done so previously. These measures significantly restricted the use of safer routes from South America to the northern part of the continent. As Durand and Massey (2010) have demonstrated, increased migration controls do not halt flows; rather, they render them more perilous, intricate, and expensive. The tightening of migration policies toward Venezuelans in Mexico and Central America has had a visible impact on their mobility trajectories, particularly in the rise of irregular migration journeys. The most notable change has been the intensification of overland transit toward the north, especially through the perilous Darién route.

Between 2015 and 2020, the number of Venezuelans crossing the Darién Gap was marginal, with fewer than 100 individuals crossing per year. However, in 2021, the number rose to nearly 3,000, and in 2022 it surged to 150,000. In 2023, it climbed to 328,650, and in 2024, 209,000 crossings were recorded. This dramatic increase coincides with the imposition of the visa requirement by Mexico in 2022. While in 2021 Venezuelans

2 The forced displacement of Venezuelans began around 2015 as a consequence of the political, economic, and social collapse that unfolded in the country and, in less than a decade, reached approximately eight million people. About 87 percent moved to other Latin American countries. In the early years, departures were directed mainly toward neighboring countries, which to this day continue to host the largest share of the displaced Venezuelan population. Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador together account for around 91 percent of all Venezuelans in the region. This pattern is explained by the lack of identity documents and passports, as well as the economic constraints on international travel. Over time, destinations expanded, and Venezuelans now have a significant presence in virtually every country in the Americas. The absence of documents and the expansion of visa regimes have contributed to making this a predominantly land-based and highly precarious form of displacement (Gandini et al., 2022; R4V, 2025).

3 The procedure requires proof of income equivalent to one hundred days of the general minimum wage in force in the Federal District (sic) over the past three months, which amounts to 510 US dollars, a figure unattainable for a Venezuelan person. If the applicant cannot prove stable employment with an official certificate, then they must demonstrate income equivalent to 300 days of wages, that is, 1,530 US dollars (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2022).

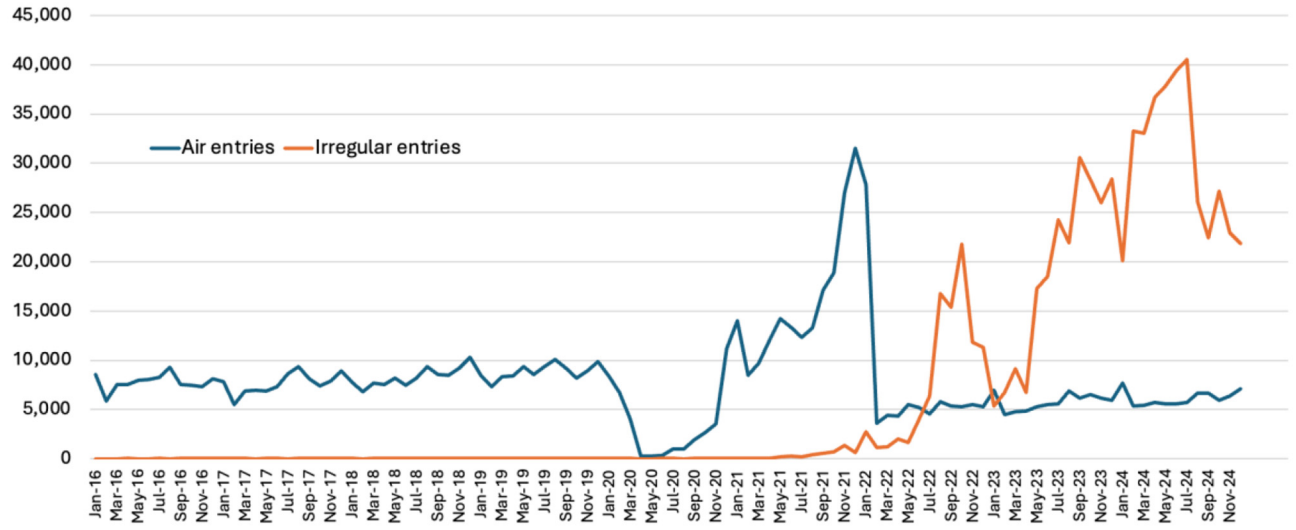

FIGURE 1
Air arrivals and events involving Venezuelan nationals in an irregular migration situation in Mexico, 2016–2025. Own elaboration based on data from the Unit for Migration Policy, Registration and Identity of Persons. Irregular migration situation events in Mexico: http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Boletines_Estadisticos/2024/Cuadros2024/cuadro_3.1.1.xls Air arrivals: http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Boletines_Estadisticos/2024/Cuadros2024/cuadro_1.3.xls.

accounted for just 1% of those transiting through the Darién, in 2022 they made up 61%. This proportion has continued to rise steadily: 63% in 2023 and 69% in 2024[4].

Mexico's visa requirement is part of a broader web of migration control externalization policies promoted by the United States (Zolberg, 1999; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015). This measure has played a decisive role in the growing irregularization of migration across much of the continent, with the Venezuelan flow at its center.

4.1 Between control and permissive passage: irregularized migrant transit as a strategy of hemispheric governance

To examine how the governance of migrant transit has been reconfigured across the Americas, this article analyzes the trajectories of six Venezuelan individuals, five men and one woman, who traveled across a significant portion of the continent over a fifteen-month period. All of them were in Tijuana at the beginning of March 2023 and had started their migratory project toward the United States between August and October 2022. However, they had left Venezuela between 2014 and 2021 and had resided in countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru for several years before arriving in Mexico (Figure 1). Thus, they had begun their migratory processes between 2 and 9 years before this latest stage. Although some had managed to settle in certain countries temporarily, mainly Colombia, there persisted a sense of instability and the idea of "continuing to search." Dissatisfaction with living conditions, ongoing economic hardship, and even fear that conditions in those countries might deteriorate as they had in Venezuela, fueled the decision to keep moving.

All six Venezuelan citizens had held some form of regular migratory status in one or more of the host countries where they resided, although in some cases, that status had expired. This underscores the importance of the various regularization strategies implemented across the region, although in some cases, their scope was limited by their temporary nature (Gandini and Selee, 2023).

When asked about the reasons behind their decision to migrate again, most respondents cited the difficulty of achieving meaningful integration in their previous countries of residence. Even during periods in which they held a temporary residence permit, most were unable to enter the formal labor market and generally reported that their income was insufficient to cover basic needs, including sending remittances to Venezuela. The lack of concrete improvements in previous contexts also discouraged them from seeking regularization in new destinations. As Antonio put it: "In Peru I didn't even try; I already knew it wouldn't make a difference".

Beyond this group of six, other interviews conducted between 2021 and 2024 with people in transit in the Darién region and various points in Mexico also highlight that the perception often drove recent migration—though not necessarily based on reliable evidence—that the conditions for entering the United States under President Biden's administration were more favorable than during Trump's first term (Feldmann and Sturino, 2024; The Economist, 2024). Some studies have documented how, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the circulation of migration-promoting messages intensified on social media and digital platforms (WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram), encouraging migration—particularly by presenting the Darién Gap as a viable route to the north (Tomasi and Vicari, 2023; Gandini et al., 2024).

Except Alma, a 60-year-old woman, all of those whose transit trajectories were reconstructed in detail, and most of all

4 Panama Migration Statistic (https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/).

interviewees, migrated by crossing the Darién jungle, using routes exposed to numerous hardships and dangers. Alma traveled by air to Nicaragua and from there continued by various means and strategies to Mexico. Although many women cross the Darién jungle, the accounts show that when there are enough economic resources to avoid that danger, that option is often reserved for them. Alma's husband migrated through the Darién and, once he saved enough money in the United States, he financed a more direct route for her toward the north of the continent.

Among the people interviewed, some 11 distinct forms of transportation were identified from Colombia to the United States, ranging from walking long stretches to traveling by formal and informal buses, taxis, trains, *combis*[5], balsas or piraguas[6], motorcycles, airplanes, Uber, hitchhiking, and bicycles, which were used in combination and often repeated across significant parts of the continent. This variety illustrates the fragmentation and precarity of migrant transit. In virtually all cases, payment was required for transportation. Some of these were official means of travel, while others were created specifically to serve the needs of migrants along these routes.

The reconstructed itineraries included nearly thirty stops in different localities, highlighting not only the length of the journey but also the logistical and territorial complexity involved. These were places where migrants had to remain temporarily due to a lack of funds to continue, prompting them to work or wait for remittances—often after having been robbed, extorted, or kidnapped—or simply because the cost of transit had exceeded their initial estimates.

When asked about the overall cost of the journey, interviewees described the challenge of calculating it, as funding sources were typically multiple and fragmented. Additionally, they noted that at the outset, they had no clear idea of the total cost. In the late 1990s, the average cost of crossing into the United States was around $600, according to data from the Mexican Migration Project. In the early 2000s, that figure rose to between $1,000 and $1,700 (Gandini et al., 2020). By 2023, the average cost had soared to $7,800 (Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México, 2023). Today, the cost of transit has increased exponentially. Among those interviewed for this research, the average cost was $9,000.

Coyotaje, smuggling facilitation, has long been a key mechanism for enabling transit and border crossings, particularly between Mexico and the United States for over a century (Durand and Arias, 2005). In the 1980s and 1990s, it was common for *coyotes* to offer full-package services, often "door-to-door." Migrants were "picked up" in their hometowns and "delivered" to Chicago, Houston, or Los Angeles (Spener, 2005), often only paying upon arrival. Over time, their services became more sophisticated in response to increased border enforcement and other risks, while costs rose and the guarantees of success diminished.

Unlike those previous payment arrangements, in which intermediaries and *coyotes* offered a set fee for defined services, the current landscape of *coyotaje* in the Americas has become more complex and diversified. It now involves not only "professional smugglers" and members of organized criminal networks—who have taken on an increasingly active role in the migration economy (Achilli, 2024; Achilli et al., 2024), but also local community members who assist migrants along their journeys and, in doing so, find a means of livelihood (Gandini et al., 2024). These blurred boundaries between migrants and coyotes, identified by Frank-Vitale (2020), also extend to local inhabitants.

Historically, payment for *coyotes* was often financed by relatives already residing in the United States, who loaned money for the trip and were repaid in installments. In recent years, however, migrants must gather funds before even beginning their journey. They start the trip with part of the money collected through savings, asset sales, remittances, and loans. To finance their transit, many rely on the formal banking system, informal lending in their communities of origin or residence, including local lenders or usurious arrangements. Along the way, they receive money transfers from their home countries—or various other places—as a strategy to avoid losing all their funds if robbed or extorted. This continues until migrants often run out of money mid-journey, forcing them to stop and seek work to continue or to request remittances from friends or family. Only a few cases managed to travel with almost no resources. One such case is that of Yandriley[7], who left Venezuela in June 2023 with her husband and four children under the age of nine. After working for a couple of months in Colombia, they continued to earn what they had and reached Mexico City, where they remain stranded to this day.

Over the past decade, the control of irregularized migration in the Americas has intensified significantly (Tapia and González, 2014; Tapia, 2022; Domenech et al., 2022; Santi, 2022; Gómez Johnson and González Gil, 2024; Liberona et al., 2024). This tightening has been driven in part by externalization policies promoted by the United States, as well as by a growing convergence of interests among countries in the region, whose objectives regarding migration control, containment, and deterrence have progressively aligned with the U.S. agenda (Feldmann and Sturino, 2024). However, this process coexists with an approach adopted by several governments along the hemispheric migration corridor: a policy of permissive passage. This logic of pragmatic migration governance, based on transit permissiveness, manifests when states, faced with the inability to contain or integrate migratory flows, allow—explicitly or tacitly—the movement of migrants through their territories (Gandini, 2024).

Several countries have adopted explicit policies or mechanisms that facilitate the transit of migrants with irregular status, generally

5 Type of public transportation that is very characteristic of urban and suburban areas: minibuses with flexible stops that carry between 10 and 20 passengers.

6 Balsas are precarious, floating vessels with no defined shape or direction, commonly used to cross the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico. Piraguas are more elaborate, narrow, and elongated boats, usually made of wood or fiberglass, sometimes motorized. They are used in the Panamanian jungle to navigate the Tuquesa River or its nearby tributaries, especially from the Indigenous communities of Bajo Chiquito or Canaan Membrillo, depending on the route taken, to reach the migration stations.

7 She is part of the group of 26 migrants interviewed.

in exchange for direct payments or as part of bilateral agreements. Panama, for example, implemented the so-called "Controlled Flow Operation" (Operación Flujo Controlado), under which authorities transported thousands of people daily from the Migrant Temporary Reception Stations (ETRM, by its Spanish acronym)—where they arrived after crossing the Darién Gap—to the border with Costa Rica. In October 2023, Panama and Costa Rica expanded this corridor through a "new mobility plan," which allowed for the expedited passage of about fifty buses per day without stopping at the binational border, entering directly into a Costa Rican reception center located 17 kilometers inside the country[8].

This passage is not free. Migrants must pay various sums along the route: from the initial boat crossings between Necoclí and Capurganá or Acandí, which are controlled by criminal groups, to payments to "guides" or for basic services during the jungle crossing. Once beyond the Darién, they must pay for river transportation to the Reception Stations and, subsequently, for bus transfers to Costa Rica. If the migrants lack sufficient resources, they become stranded in the ETRMs, which function as intermediate holding sites where migration control is concentrated.

This pattern is repeated in other countries along the route. In Nicaragua and Honduras, governments charge official fees for the issuance of safe-conducts or transit permits. In Guatemala and Mexico, although some formal mechanisms exist, payments tend to be discretionary and are often channeled through informal practices carried out by state officials or non-state actors, such as criminal organizations or intermediary networks. In all cases, the operating principle is similar: passage is permitted so that migrants do not remain in national territory. This pragmatic logic responds in part to pressure from the United States, but also to local interests that convert migrant transit into a direct source of income.

This scheme reveals a regional model of transit governance and reproduction based on a form of "flexible externalization" This strategy can be characterized as a continental laissez-passer arrangement, in which, from the north of South America through the Central American corridor, countries have played a dual role: on the one hand, they form part of the Global North's migration control apparatus; on the other, they act as facilitators of passage under conditions that precarize and commercialize mobility. The "letting through" strategy is particularly contradictory when considering that nearly all countries along the corridor have imposed visa requirements on Venezuelans (and other nationalities), which formally prevents their regular entry. Nevertheless, in practice, these same countries allow people without visas to continue their route through the payment of safe-conducts, temporary permits, bilateral agreements, or informal fees. In other words, although they cannot legally enter, they are permitted to proceed if they pay the required fee. This paradox illustrates how irregular transit becomes functional to states: it prevents migrants from staying in national territories while allowing governments to derive direct economic benefits from their passage.

8 Information reported in the press and corroborated through interviews with SENAFRONT (Panama's National Border Service) authorities and various actors within the humanitarian response structure interviewed in Metetí, Panama.

4.2 Chutes and ladders: strategic deterrence through keeping in transit in Mexico

For decades, Mexico was primarily a country of origin for migrants heading to the United States (Durand, 2016). Although transit migration through its territory has historical antecedents and has been central to migration studies (Durand and Massey, 2004; Casillas, 2010; Martínez et al., 2015), it intensified during the 1990s and 2000s, with increasing flows from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Rodríguez Chávez, 2016), and later with flows from other parts of the continent and beyond. This transformation of Mexico into a country of transit, along with the stabilization of Mexican emigration, has become one of the main migratory characteristics of the recent period (Alba, 2024), consolidating Mexico as the most transited migration corridor in the world.

The growing prominence of transit migration within the Mesoamerican migration system has been facilitated by Mexico's relatively porous southern border (Durand, 2022). Although formal control policies have existed for years, they have often been counteracted by local networks, complex geographic conditions, and pragmatic state decisions aimed at allowing passage (Castillo, 2017). This border has been described as "porous", due to the coexistence of informal flows and an irregular state presence in both rural and urban areas (Castillo and Toussaint, 2015).

However, that porosity has not meant an absence of control. As Rojas Wiesner (2018) has repeatedly pointed out, it is a selective, unequal, and conflictive porosity, characterized by informal regulation mechanisms, institutional violence, intermittent surveillance, institutionalized precariousness, and the selective enforcement of the law (Basok et al., 2015). Variations in irregular transit, as well as the intensification or weakening of specific routes, have been closely tied to changes in migration policy (Martínez et al., 2015).

Beginning in October 2018, the formation of Central American migrant caravans marked a turning point in transit dynamics across Mexico (Gandini et al., 2020). The Mexican state responded with a strategy of negotiation with the United States, which culminated in 2019 in the creation of the National Guard under military command, assigning it migration enforcement functions that had previously belonged to the National Migration Institute (INM). This shift deepened the militarization of border space and extended it into the interior through road checkpoints, joint INM and National Guard operations in southern highways, and an increase in detentions. Far from reducing transit, militarization reconfigured it: routes became longer, more fragmented, and more dangerous (Cárdenas Alaminos, 2023).

For decades, the United States has promoted the externalization of migration control throughout the Americas, progressively delegating containment functions to Mexico and Central American countries (París Pombo, 2024). This strategy, implemented through diplomatic pressure, bilateral agreements, and conditional cooperation. has shaped an architecture of extended migration control, pushing the control border southward. In recent years, this logic has deepened through more sophisticated mechanisms. Policies such as *metering* and the Migrant Protection Protocols

(MPP)[9] led to a convergence between asylum policy and border enforcement at the Mexico–United States border, forcing asylum seekers to remain in Mexican territory while their cases were processed by U.S. immigration courts. As a result, the waiting period and the right to asylum were extraterritorialized (París Pombo, 2020), and the northern border cities of Mexico became buffer waiting zones (Silva and Miranda, 2020; FitzGerald, 2019; París Pombo, 2024). Later, with the introduction of the CBP One application[10], access to the asylum system became mediated through a digital platform that functioned as a new entry filter, extending the waiting space throughout Mexican territory, with a notable concentration in Mexico City, materializing bordering processes (Matossian, 2024). Mexico ceased to be solely a country of passage and became a space of containment or precarious settlement, in some ways, transit became destination (Alba Villalever and Schütze, 2021). In this context, "containment without resolution" has emerged as a migration governance strategy that produces meanwhile spaces, no longer merely zones of transit, but inhabited places where migrants attempt to rebuild their lives amid deep uncertainty (Gil Everaert, 2021).

Laissez-passer policies have selectively softened borders and, paradoxically, contributed to the reproduction and amplification of transit migration throughout the Americas. This approach, dominant from Colombia to Guatemala, contrasts with the Mexican case: as the last country of transit before the United States, Mexico cannot simply "let migrants through." While this was a tolerated, and even functional, practice for years, the increasing emphasis on containment and the externalization of migration control has severely limited that possibility. Instead, Mexico has assumed, not uniformly but predominantly, the role of a containment country.

One telling indicator of this role is the growing divergence between the volume of irregular migration and deportations (Table 1). Since 2020, the number of people in irregular migratory status has risen steadily, while deportations have shown a clearly decreasing trend, both in absolute and especially in relative terms. This pattern is observable across the migrant population, but it is particularly pronounced in the case of Venezuelans: their share of irregularity events grew from just 0.2% in 2020 to 30% in 2024. In contrast, the proportion of Venezuelan nationals deported dropped drastically, accounting for just 0.2% of all deportations in the same year. It is worth noting that, as can be seen, this trend is widespread and not limited to Venezuelans. This evolution reveals Mexico's role not only as a country of transit, but also as a space of temporary retention, where migration control is exercised without necessarily resulting in deportation.

The trend shown in the preceding data shapes the way people transit through Mexico. Although their hemispheric journey involves crossing multiple countries and usually takes between six and eight months since they embarked on their most recent migration project, in most cases, the longest period of stay occurs within Mexican territory, as shown in Figure 2. There, the itineraries of many migrants become repetitive, almost like a déjà vu. What has occurred in the post-pandemic years is that, in their attempt to reach the United States, migrants have combined multiple strategies: they tried to obtain an asylum appointment in the U.S. through digital applications (which has become increasingly difficult over time), they attempt to access international protection in Mexico, and they follow recommendations on where to move that circulate on social media or come from informal intermediaries. Often, during the waiting period, they attempt to travel northward but are frequently obstructed by actors such as the National Guard, the National Migration Institute (INM), the police, the military, and criminal groups. These obstacles are often overcome through the payment of money.

Although Mexican legislation formally establishes a rights-based framework for all foreigners in the country, including those in an irregular situation or in transit, its implementation is markedly uneven across the territory. The Migration Law (2011) classifies irregular entry as an administrative infraction, mandates equal treatment regardless of migratory status, and sets strict procedural limits on detention and deportation. In practice, however, these guarantees coexist with regionally differentiated enforcement, producing a gap between the legal framework and the forms of control experienced on the ground. This disparity does not simply reflect isolated cases of corruption or negligence, although both may occur. Rather, it reveals a fragmented mode of governance through which irregularity is selectively produced and managed, as will be examined in greater detail in the next section.

The containment policy, which initially imposed a visa requirement to enter Mexico, has been complemented by multiple strategies that interrupt and reproduce transit, effectively creating a form of "transit in waiting" or "waiting in transit." Within this approach, at least two key elements can be identified: (1) A pattern of detention, release, and dispersal throughout the territory; and (2) The creation and instrumental use of bureaucratic-administrative categories.

4.3 The pattern of detention, release, and spatial dispersal

Migrant interviewees exhibit similar patterns in their transit trajectories through Mexico. Felipe's case is a representative example of such itineraries and clearly illustrates the interaction between containment policies and the reproduction of transit (see Figure 3). Like other interviewees, Felipe remained in transit through Mexico for over 6 months, traveling through more than 20 localities across the country, from south to north. During

9 *Metering* was a policy that limited the number of asylum seekers admitted per day at U.S. ports of entry, forcing them to wait in Mexico. It was documented as early as 2016 and expanded in 2018 before falling into disuse. The Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) was a policy under which asylum seekers were processed in the United States and then returned to Mexico to await their hearings. It was implemented in 2019, was officially terminated by the United States in 2021, and individuals enrolled in the program were formally released from it when they attended their subsequent court hearings in 2022.

10 CBP One was an application used by CBP to assign appointments to asylum seekers, who had to register and wait in Mexico until receiving a slot. It became the main mechanism in 2023 and stopped being used for this purpose in 2025.

TABLE 1 Irregular migrant events and deportations in Mexico (2016–2024): total and Venezuelan cases.

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total irregular events	186,216	93,846	131,445	182,940	82,379	309,692	441,409	782,173	1,234,698
Total deportations	159,872	82,237	115,686	149,812	61,001	130,275	121,963	53,346	20,834
% Deported/Total irregular events	85.9%	87.6%	88.0%	81.9%	74.0%	42.1%	27.6%	6.8%	1.7%
Irregular events—Venezuelan nationals	126	190	288	452	183	4,360	96,197	222,994	361,203
Deportations—Venezuelan nationals	120	85	93	87	31	371	1,589	770	583
% Deported/irregular Venezuelan events	95.2%	44.7%	32.3%	19.2%	16.9%	8.5%	1.7%	0.3%	0.2%
% irregular Venezuelans/total irregular events	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	1.4%	21.8%	28.5%	29.3%

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Monthly Bulletin of Migration Statistics issued by the Migration Policy Unit and the Registry of Identity of Persons (Unidad de Política Migratoria, 2024). Available at: http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos.

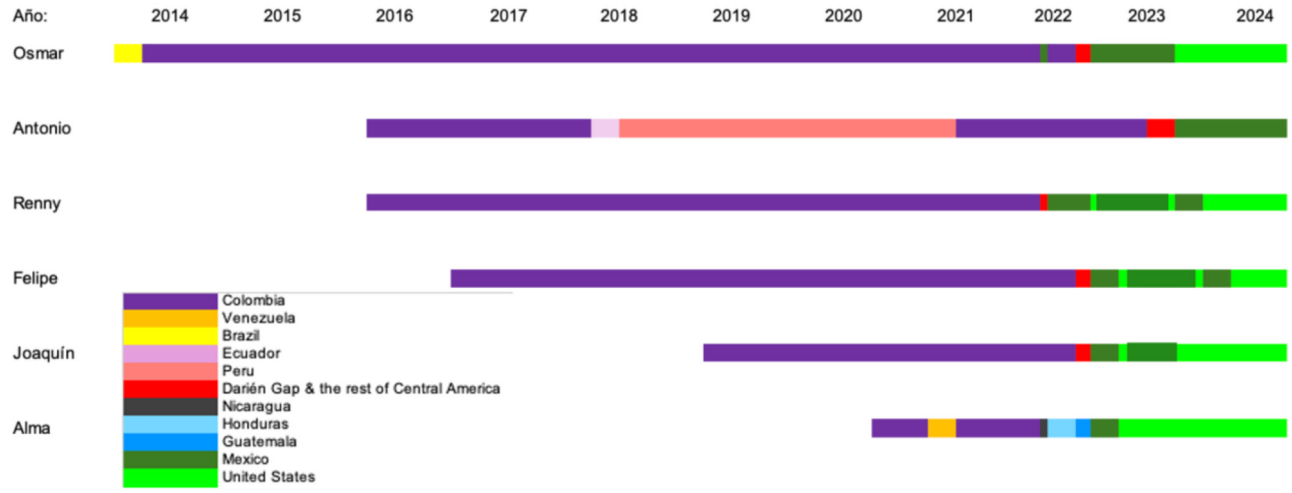

FIGURE 2
Transit itineraries of Venezuelan nationals from the country of departure to Mexico or the United States. Source: elaboración propia con base en entrevistas. Transit through the Darién and the subsequent Central American countries up to Mexico is marked in red. These countries are only indicated in the itinerary when the stay lasted more than 1 week.

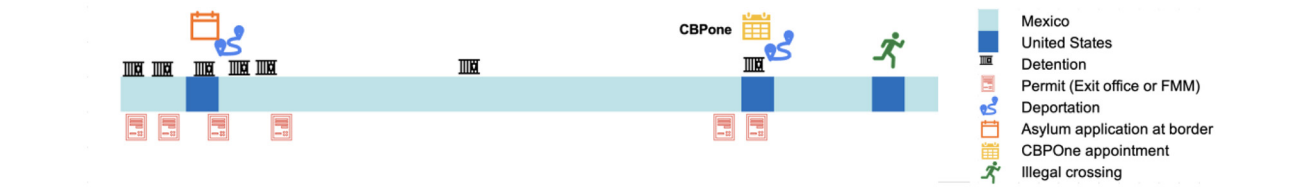

FIGURE 3
Felipe's migratory and documentation itinerary (October 12, 2022–April 5, 2023, 2024). Source: Personal interviews conducted by the author with Felipe.

that period, he was detained on seven occasions by migration authorities, both Mexican and U.S. (Figure 3, black symbols).

Migrant transit in Mexico can become lethargic, interrupted, and at the same time intentionally reproduced through the intervention of migration authorities. In his attempt to reach the United States, Felipe was intercepted on multiple occasions by the National Migration Institute (INM), which repeatedly detained him and transferred him back to the south of the country, where he was released, forcing him to retrace his journey northward again and again. This strategy results in a type of "internal deportations," through which detained migrants are transported by land or air from northern border states to the south (particularly Tabasco) (Vaquero Simancas, 2024). The aim is to reduce migratory pressure in border areas, prevent migrants from accessing institutions such as COMAR, and exhaust and discourage them through a loop of detentions and displacements without a clear direction.

At some point in his journey, Felipe attempted to settle temporarily in Quintana Roo, hoping to find work, earn money, and stay off the radar of migration enforcement while awaiting an appointment through the CBP One application. This reflected an expression of immobility within mobility, or a co-production of mobility and immobility, and of the ways in which migrants may temporarily cede agency in order to advance or survive in contexts of intensified control (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2016). However, he later decided to return to Mexico City to continue his route northward from there.

Each time he reached the northern border and tried to enter the United States, he was rejected and returned to Mexico in coordination with Mexican authorities. For example, after his case was denied in El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, he was flown to Piedras Negras (Coahuila, Mexico), where he was handed over to INM, which then placed him on a bus to Tapachula, Chiapas. For Felipe, this was essentially like starting over. After countless attempts to secure an appointment through the CBP One app, he finally succeeded in Tijuana, although he was then located in Ciudad Juárez. This meant he had to raise money and take a flight there, "because going by bus is always very dangerous, because of the cartels, and because 'the migration' was sending people back" (Felipe). After denying him entry in San Diego, U.S. migration authorities released him in a different part of the border, while his cousin, who had been with him, was left at that same border, on the Tijuana side. Thus, in both countries, detention is often followed by release and dispersal throughout the territory, especially toward the south.

This pattern is not unique to Felipe's case. Osmar reported being repeatedly taken off buses by migration agents and sent back south ["In Puebla migration took us off… they sent us back (towards the southern border)"]. Renny also described how migration authorities forced him to restart his journey: "I was already arriving in San Pedro Tapanatepec (Chiapas), I was missing like 500 (meters), they grabbed me and sent me back to Arriaga (Chiapas)". This pattern repeats itself from the south to the north of Mexican territory. "We tried to reach Matamoros (Tamaulipas, on Mexico's northern border), but migration caught us in Reynosa (Tamaulipas), we stayed there for about 7 days. From there they sent us 'down' to Villahermosa (Tabasco)" (Antonio). Very often migrants recount that they are not even taken into migration detention centers: "We arrived on a Sunday around 2 in the morning in Villahermosa, they left us outside *migration* [the detention center], we headed to the bus station to go 'back up' to Mexico City again, by 9 'the migration' had already caught us again and again sent us back down, I spent another 3 days there" (Joaquín).

Likewise, in several cases non-state actors reproduced the same capture-release logic that reconfigures mobility: "(In Ciudad Juárez) the cartel took us… they were asking us for money… in the end they let us go and told us 'we don't want to see you around here again, find somewhere else to cross'… we stayed there all afternoon going up and down." Various actors intervene in this dynamic, cooperating to obstruct the journey and profit from it. Joaquín was traveling on one of the buses that transport migrants; they depart next to the main bus stations, charge more, and supposedly offer safe routes to avoid checkpoints and controls. "We were almost arriving in Ciudad Juárez. A cartel stopped us, diverted the bus, took it along a guide road, and put us into a warehouse, like a depot. They got on the bus and said they were from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. […] They told us: it's 1,000 or 1,500 [Mexican] pesos per person, and whoever doesn't have it gets off the bus. […] We paid and continued. Ten min from where we were, there was a military police checkpoint. I mean, it's as if they were coordinated with the cartel, it's not possible that they're just 2 km away… absurd things."

As a result, what emerges is a pattern of detention, release, and dispersal operating at both national and transnational levels, coordinated by more than one country and by many actors. These dynamics clearly reflect the policies of externalized migration control (Vega Macías, 2021; París Pombo, 2024). During transit, individuals are intercepted by state and non-state actors and then released further south within the country. This cycle is repeated multiple times, generating a form of (im)mobility produced bureaucratically or criminally (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2016). Migrants are often separated from their companions, with the aim of disrupting collective mobility. Rather than a coherent migration control policy, this strategy constitutes a regime based on spatial and temporal dispersal, cumulative exhaustion, and deterrence through fatigue, aiming to wear down migrants. Some key actors describe this scheme as a state machinery colluded with organized crime, resulting in an extermination strategy aimed at "finishing off" or "breaking" migrants (KA, shelter worker 1). In contrast, several others agree that, rather than extermination, this scheme of physical and mental exhaustion is part of a broader view of migration as commodification, a business that benefits many actors (KA, international organization representative 4 and 5; KA, shelter worker 2; KA, shelter worker 4). Finally, others argue that this migration policy reflects a lack of knowledge and ignorance on the part of the responsible government authorities (KA, international organization representative 2).

Viewing Felipe's itinerary on the map of Mexican territory reveals another dimension (Figure 4). These practices of detention, return, and dispersal resulted in Felipe traveling more than 10,000 kilometers within Mexico over the course of nearly 6 months, repeating routes, being forcibly relocated, and experiencing an indefinite, prolonged, and disoriented transit shaped by a mode of migration governance that uses this strategy as a mechanism of containment, deterrence, and attrition. This itinerary, or fragments of it, is repeatedly observed among the other interviewed migrants.

4.4 The strategic use of bureaucratic-administrative categories

A key element of the strategy of containment and reproduction of migrant transit in Mexico is the creation and instrumental use of bureaucratic-administrative migration categories. As a result of encounters with migration authorities, which generally involve a stay in a migrant detention center, Felipe received six transit or entry permits (Figure 3, red symbol). The first of these permits is a *Oficio de salida* (exit order), which is issued when migration authorities inform a person that they must leave the country within a set period. This document began to be used several years ago with "extracontinental" (especially Africans) populations as a

FIGURE 4
Segment of Felipe's transit through Mexican territory and his attempts to cross into the United States. Source: Personal interviews conducted by the author with Felipe.

mechanism to address the lack of other tools, particularly when authorities were unable to contact a consulate[11]. The Migration Law provides that the National Migration Institute may issue this administrative resolution in three specific circumstances (Art. 137): when the foreign national withdraws from their ongoing migration procedure (including the refugee process), when the authority denies that procedure, or when the person voluntarily requests to leave the national territory. In recent years, both migrants and migration authorities have used it as a de facto permit to allow temporary transit.

The second used document is the *Forma Migratoria Múltiple* (FMM, for its Spanish acronym), issued to Venezuelan migrants who have been returned from the United States and received by Mexican authorities. The FMM is a form usually granted to tourists entering Mexico, specifying the number of days they are allowed to remain[12]. This, again, reveals a paradox like that seen in other countries along the migration corridor: a Venezuelan national cannot receive an FMM if entering from Mexico's southern border or arriving by air without a tourist visa obtained in advance, yet when returned from the United States, they are granted one without such requirements.

Throughout their journeys, migrants receive these types of documents multiple times, generally after spending several days in custody. Upon release, they are issued a new permit that provides a temporary, though limited, form of legal status. This cycle is repeated many times throughout their journey across the country. There are no uniform pattern or clear criteria for the issuance of these documents: the waiting period varies, their validity can range from 3 days to 30 or even 60, and the accompanying instructions differ. In some cases, migrants are ordered to leave the country; in others, they are instructed to exit "through the nearest border"; and in others still, "through Mexico's southern border."

The usefulness of these documents is ambiguous and often contradictory. Although they are commonly required by private transportation companies (both air and land) under pressure from Mexican authorities, they are often not recognized by the very authorities that issue them. Felipe illustrates the strict requirements imposed by transportation companies: "They didn't want to sell me a bus ticket… they asked me for the travel permit. I only had the exit order, which was already expired" (Felipe). Joaquín, in

11 Information provided by Dr Juan Carlos Narváez in personal communication.

12 In practice, it was replaced by electronic systems and the stamped passport, but at the southern border it is still being issued, apparently in a discretionary manner and without clear criteria regarding the length of time granted (KA, migration authority 2).

turn, shows how authorities themselves disregard the document: "They (my cousins) were stopped somewhere in Oaxaca, I don't remember the name of the place, and the migration officer mockingly said: 'What is this? (referring to the *oficio de salida)* This isn't valid here, only in Chiapas (where it was issued).' Right in front of them, he tore up the paper. That's why what we do now is make a copy of the permit each time it's issued, we show the copy and hide the original." Added to this is the discretionary use of exit orders, which combine formal validity periods with periods of detention that make them difficult or impossible to exercise in practice: "They made me sign the exit order, as if I had already left, but they took me to Las Agujas (detention center in Mexico City)… My permit to leave the country was valid for 30 working days, but I spent 14 days locked up there" (Osmar). Finally, the territorial validity of these documents is arbitrarily redefined depending on the checkpoint and the authority interpreting them: "I got my permit… I was traveling on a 'regular'[13] bus… they would take us off and tell us that the permit wasn't valid, that it was only for Tapachula or places down there. Or they would tear it up, and send us back south" (Renny).

The ambiguity and discretion in the use of migration bureaucracy is confirmed by other actors. A human rights defender explains that people detained in Mexico City are often released in Villahermosa, Tabasco, without being given the exit order. When she requests it, they then provide it (KA, NGO representative 3), and the document includes the instruction that the migrant must regularize their status in Mexico City within 10 days. However, in other states this same document has a broader validity that even allows people to obtain population registry and tax identification documents (KA, international organization 2).

In this way, a form of temporary regularity is produced within a markedly irregular bureaucracy. A complex and slow administrative apparatus generates brief intervals of legal status, usually following periods of detention. This heavy, delayed, and obstructive migration bureaucracy serves a clear purpose: to interrupt and complicate transit, with a strong, although not always successful, intention of deterrent effect. Bureaucratization is used as a strategy of attrition (KA, international organization 3). As Osmar said after receiving his fifth such document: "I told the migration officer who gave it to me: 'Explain clearly: what can I do with this? How far can I go?'" And he concluded, "I was already physically and mentally exhausted. This instrumental, ambiguous, and arbitrary use of migration bureaucracy is intertwined with the profits generated by mobility and with widespread practices of corruption. A representative of an international organization recounted that, while at a bus station, she witnessed a bus driver holding several dollar bills in his hand, received in exchange for allowing migrants without documents or permits to board, while speaking with three police officers (KA, international organization 5). This is confirmed by a former migration official, who noted that "for money, one can move within the country" (KA, migration authority 2).

Campos-Delgado (2021) documented that the governance of "extracontinental" (Asians and Africans) flows in Mexico operated through exceptional schemes that, rather than applying formal, homogeneous admission rules, relied on discretionary practices such as administrative tolerance, bureaucratic omission, exit orders, temporary permits, short-term detentions, and internal transfers. In addition, internal bordering practices that immobilize people in motion, including non-permanent checkpoints deployed across the territory to detect and contain populations on the move, have become central to this regime (Campos-Delgado and Yrizar Barbosa, 2023). These mechanisms fragmented state management and enabled mobility without granting rights or stable conditions of stay, constituting an informal device to direct transit toward the United States without blocking it. Building on this evidence, I show in this paper that the strategy persists but has been reoriented. Whereas, previously it enabled passage toward the north, it now operates to prevent the crossing and to keep people moving within Mexico without settling.

As a result of this continental architecture of control, Mexico has strengthened its role as a key node within an interconnected hemispheric migration system, where detention, registration, and deportation (intern or transnational) measures operate in coordination with the United States, not necessarily to halt irregular flows, but to reshape them according to a binational strategy of shared control (Heredia Zubieta, 2016). Mexico has become a space of waiting, structured through migration retention strategies that force many people to "wait in transit" within its territory. This retention does not imply absolute immobility, but rather a contained, fragmented, and disoriented form of mobility. Far from a linear journey toward the north, internal forced mobility predominates in Mexico, without a clear direction and often induced by migration authorities themselves.

This context of sluggish transit (Gandini, 2024) and forced waiting exposes migrants to much higher risks than those they had historically faced (KA, shelter worker 2). To evade this strategy of control and profit, migrants often make themselves invisible, move away from established routes and shelters, or are extorted and become prey to organized crime (KA, academic 2; KA, shelter workers 1 and 3). In the effort to criminalize and stigmatize Venezuelan migrants (especially those with tattoos), authorities and other actors unjustly and without evidence link them to the Tren de Aragua, and some of them paradoxically end up being co-opted by other cartels due to the documentary, social, and economic precarity in which they find themselves (KA, academic 1).

Migration governance in Mexico operates, in practice, like a "chutes and ladders" system[14]: a deliberately erratic, fragmented, and often arbitrary network of rules, checkpoints, and control

13 He is referring to having used a regular public bus service, not the parallel buses that operate specifically for migrants. Those buses charge more and promise safety by taking alternate routes to avoid checkpoints, something that in practice is not guaranteed.

14 The expression "Chutes and Ladders" refers to a children's board game widely known in the United States, in which players move forward across a board by rolling a die. Ladders allow them to quickly climb ahead, while chutes abruptly send them backward, making it harder to reach the finish line. This non-linear dynamic of progress and setbacks serves as a metaphor for describing migration governance in Mexico. In Latin America, games with similar mechanics are often known as "Serpientes y escaleras" (Snakes and Ladders) or "El juego de la oca" (The Game of the Goose), although the

mechanisms that obstruct the movement of people in transit. It simulates closure of the migration project while in reality producing forced setbacks and keeping migrants on the move. In this strategy, transit is instrumentalized as a central device of containment, attrition, and deterrence, even though the latter proves widely ineffective in practice.

Despite the many tactics deployed to contain mobility within Mexican territory, five of the six analyzed trajectories had managed to obtain some form of temporary legal status in the United States. Four of these individuals initially entered the U.S. irregularly; of them, one (Joaquín) remained in irregular status, while the other three (Osmar, Felipe, and Renny) had initiated procedures to obtain asylum and Temporary Protected Status (TPS), simultaneously. In all these cases, there were multiple attempts to enter U.S. territory, including efforts to secure appointments through the CBP One application, followed by rejections after interviews. Only Alma was able to enter regularly through an appointment granted via CBP One, which allowed her to begin an asylum application. She also held TPS and will have her first asylum appointment in December 2025. The only person who remained in Mexico, Antonio, has refugee status.

The various strategies migrants pursue in order to reach the United States are reflected in Felipe's journey. He made three attempts to cross into the U.S. (Figure 3, dark blue), with the last one being successful.

1. On his first attempt, he presented himself at a port of entry to request asylum. This occurred in Ciudad Juárez. Authorities concluded that he had not established credible fear and deported him quickly.
2. The second attempt came after securing an appointment in Tijuana through the CBP One application. His application was rejected because, when asked whether he was afraid to return to Venezuela, Felipe answered "no," following the advice of a "lawyer" he had seen on TikTok.
3. Finally, Felipe crossed irregularly through a section of the border wall in Ciudad Juárez. Once in the U.S., he was granted TPS, which remained valid as of December 2024.

5 Discussion: transit as governance in the Americas

This article has examined how irregularized migrant transit has been shaped, governed, and strategically deployed across the Americas. By tracing the empirical trajectories of Venezuelan migrants and analyzing the bureaucratic and legal mechanisms that structure their mobility, it demonstrates that transit is neither accidental nor marginal. On the contrary, it constitutes a central and deliberately reproduced feature of contemporary migration governance. This research offers a critical contribution by unpacking the multiple ways in which transit is strategically deployed as a tool of regional migration governance.

The article offers a conceptual contribution by engaging critically with existing theoretical frameworks and showing that these not only help organize the empirical evidence but also expand current understandings of transit governance. First, the notion of a migration regime proposed here builds upon and deepens approaches that have analyzed it mainly as a control apparatus aimed at deterring, stopping or expelling, or as an extension of Global North enforcement devices. By developing the four dimensions of the regime concept, the analysis shows that, in the South and Central American corridor, the regime does not merely adapt restrictive mechanisms but also incorporates transit as a structuring element of its functioning. This demonstrates that keeping migrants in movement, without the possibility of settlement and under unstable legal conditions, operates as an organizing principle of regional governance rather than as a secondary or unintended effect of control policies.

Second, the notion of flexible externalization enriches existing discussions on how migration governance unfolds beyond state borders. While classical studies have emphasized the relocation of control to transit countries or the delegation of sovereign functions through more or less formal agreements, the analysis presented here shows that, in recent years in the Latin American context, these processes have taken a more contingent and dynamic form. Flexible externalization is expressed through shifting combinations of permissiveness and restriction, as well as through discretionary arrangements and unstable administrative practices that allow states to modulate mobility in response to changing needs and pressures. This perspective complements previous approaches by showing that externalization in the region does not consist solely of transferring responsibilities southward, but of sustaining an architecture of irregularized mobility that generates strategic political and economic benefits for the states along the corridor and for those seeking to contain migration from outside the region. This strategy highlights a shared regional rationality in which transit is sustained because no state conceives of itself as a place of destination, and mobility operates as a way of indefinitely postponing responsibility for migrant presence.

In third place, the notions of *laissez-passer* and *chutes and ladders* function as operational categories within the article's analytical framework, since they allow for the identification of complementary modalities through which states produce and govern transit in the region. The logic of *laissez-passer* shows that, in much of South and Central America, mobility is managed by allowing migrants to move onward without granting regular entry or settlement, resulting in sustained yet legally fragile transit. The logic of *chutes and ladders*, in turn, highlights how in Mexico the combination of bureaucratic discretion, successive interruptions and internal transfers keeps migrants in an oscillating movement that prevents both exit and integration. Taken together, these two logics demonstrate that transit is used both to displace and to anchor, to deter permanence while simultaneously denying the possibility of departure. These strategies are not merely reactive but reflect a deeper transformation in the architecture of migration control, confirming that irregularized transit does not represent a failure of migration governance but a form of governance in itself.

This broader reading of transit as governance opens new avenues for examining how mobility is regulated, instrumentalized, and politically negotiated across the Americas—and in other regions of the world—and underscores the need to understand regional mobility not only as a byproduct of control but also as

latter includes some additional variations. When I was preparing this research, Guillermo Yrizar used this same expression at the 2024 LASA conference.

a deliberate outcome of interconnected migration regimes. It also suggests that only comparative and multi-level analyses can capture the complex ways in which states and other actors coordinate, contest, and recalibrate transit amid shifting regional dynamics, revealing transit itself as a central arena where the politics of mobility in the Americas is continually redefined.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because UNAM does not have an Institutional Ethics Committee nor does it require formal protocol approval for this type of research. However, the study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical principles, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and the protection of participants' identities. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their verbal and audio-recorded informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. The author verifies and takes full responsibility for the use of generative artificial intelligence in the preparation of this manuscript. Generative AI was used to support the revision of the English translation of a text originally written in Spanish, as well as to improve linguistic clarity and grammar in English. All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, edited, and validated by the author to ensure academic rigor and compliance with ethical standards.

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