

From Protection to Integration:

Colombia's Migration Experiment

Kübra Aktaş



Mass displacement from Venezuela has become one of the largest mobility crises in Latin America's recent history. Colombia has stood at the centre of this crisis due to geographic proximity, historical ties, and its role as a major destination and transit country. Today, Colombia hosts millions of Venezuelan refugees and migrants while simultaneously confronting the legacies of internal armed conflict, poverty, regional inequalities, and large-scale internal displacement. For this reason, Colombia's temporary protection framework for Venezuelans should be understood as a development-oriented response by a state with constrained capacity to a large-scale forced-displacement challenge, not merely as a migration policy.

Colombia's adoption in 2021 of the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants, formally known as the *Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos* (ETPV), offered a significant example at both regional and global levels. The ETPV aimed to register Venezuelans, provide access to regular status, and facilitate safer inclusion in public services, the labour market, and the financial system through the *Permiso por Protección Temporal* (PPT). By offering a ten-year framework, the statute moved beyond a short-term humanitarian response and became a medium-term instrument for integration. In this respect, Colombia departed from approaches adopted by many countries that have either criminalised irregular migration, prioritised border security, or limited their response to temporary humanitarian assistance.

More broadly, the Colombian experience reflects an emerging debate over how states should respond to large-scale displacement in an era of protracted migration crises. While many governments have increasingly relied on deterrence, externalised border controls, and restrictive asylum policies, Colombia has pursued a strategy centred on regularisation and gradual socioeconomic inclusion. The case therefore raises a central question: whether legal recognition and integration can provide a more sustainable model of migration governance than exclusion alone.

What makes the Colombian experience significant is not only the scope of the ETPV, but also the gradual transformation of the country's migration policy over time. According to the World Bank case study on Colombia, the country's response evolved across three main phases: between 2015 and 2017, emergency humanitarian reception and the provision of basic services in border areas; between 2018 and 2021, a more institutionalised medium-term approach expanding access to health, education, child protection, and social services; and from 2021 onwards, large-scale regularisation and long-term socioeconomic integration. This sequencing distinguishes the Colombian model from a one-off "open door" policy and shows how migration was reframed from a temporary crisis to be managed into an issue of state capacity, local development, and social cohesion.

Another element that places the Colombian experience within a broader framework is its comparative relationship with Türkiye's temporary protection regime for Syrians. From around 2018 onwards, the large-scale arrival of Venezuelans in Colombia began to be discussed not only as a regional crisis but also in relation to Türkiye's experience of hosting millions of Syrians under temporary protection. This comparison stems from the fact that both countries are middle-income states, have experienced large-scale forced migration, and have developed temporary protection mechanisms beyond the classical refugee-status framework. Türkiye's experience provided Colombia with an important comparative reference point,

particularly regarding registration, access to services, participation in the labour market, and the possibility of temporary status evolving into long-term integration. However, this connection should not be interpreted as meaning that the Colombian model was directly transferred from Türkiye. A more accurate reading is that the Turkish and Colombian experiences reflect an emerging line of policy learning and exchange within the Global South.

The comparison also highlights a broader policy dilemma common to many middle-income host countries. Temporary protection can be highly effective in responding rapidly to mass displacement, yet the longer such regimes remain in place, the more they evolve from emergency legal instruments into de facto integration frameworks. In both Türkiye and Colombia, the central policy challenge has gradually shifted from providing protection to managing long-term socioeconomic inclusion while maintaining public support and institutional capacity.

The strongest aspect of the Colombian model lies in its attempt to reduce irregularity not through security-driven exclusion, but through legal recognition and registration. Irregular status exposes migrants to exploitative working conditions, limited access to health and education, housing insecurity, and risks of trafficking and abuse. From the perspective of the state, it also makes it more difficult to identify who is present in the country, where service needs are increasing, and which groups require specific forms of protection. The ETPV's structure, built around the RUMV and PPT, is therefore not merely a documentation system that provides protection. It is also an administrative instrument for data collection, planning, and public policy design in migration governance.

Colombia's approach is also important because it frames migration not only as a cost but as a potential contribution to development. Migrants with regular status can contribute to the local economy through labour market participation, expanded tax bases, consumption, entrepreneurship, and productivity gains. The World Bank case study shows that regular status increased Venezuelans' likelihood of working in the formal sector, had a positive impact on income, and generated broadly limited effects on the formal employment of the host population. This finding supports the argument that migrant integration, when properly designed, can function not only as a humanitarian responsibility but also as a long-term development tool.

Nevertheless, the Colombian model should not be idealised. Legal status is a precondition for integration, but it is not integration itself. Granting a person regular stay does not automatically mean that they will find employment, be protected from discrimination, enrol their children in school, or access the health system without interruption. Particularly in border regions, low-income neighbourhoods, and areas where public services were already fragile, the concentration of



(Fermin Torrano - Anadolu Agency)

Venezuelan populations has placed significant pressure on local authorities. Education, health, housing, water, and employment services have often struggled to meet the needs of both migrants and host communities.

This is where one of the central tensions of the Colombian case becomes visible. Although a progressive and inclusive legal framework has been established at the national level, the burden of implementation has often fallen on local institutions, municipalities, schools, hospitals, and civil society organisations. If the gap between national policy and local capacity is not addressed, temporary protection can become a strong framework on paper but a fragmented mechanism in practice. This may reinforce perceptions of “competition over resources”, particularly among poorer host communities, and strengthen anti-migrant narratives.

The fact that Colombia must simultaneously support Venezuelan refugees and migrants as well as millions of internally displaced citizens makes this picture even more complex. The country is not only responding to large-scale cross-border migration, but also to the displacement, land disputes, pressure from armed groups, and rural poverty produced by decades of internal conflict. For this reason, the integration of Venezuelans cannot be separated from Colombia’s broader agenda of social protection, peacebuilding, and local development. Otherwise, migration policy may be perceived as an additional burden placed on an already fragile social fabric.

One of the limitations of the ETPV is its temporary character. A ten-year period is considerably more generous than the short-term humanitarian permits offered by many countries. Yet it still contains uncertainties regarding permanent status, citizenship, long-term residence, and social belonging. Temporary protection gives people

time, but how that time is used is decisive. If this period is supported by labour market access, recognition of professional qualifications, permanent integration of children into the education system, and social cohesion policies, temporary status can be transformed into lasting social contribution. If not, ten years of protection may simply become an interim regime that postpones irregularity rather than resolving it.

To what extent, then, can the Colombian model serve as an example for other countries? The answer lies less in whether the model can be fully replicated and more in the principles it offers. First, in situations of mass displacement, legal recognition and registration are more effective tools of governance than security-driven exclusion. Second, temporary protection can generate integration only when it is designed alongside employment, education, health care, financial inclusion, and local service capacity. Third, without international support, host countries cannot sustainably carry burdens of this scale. The comparison between Türkiye and Colombia is also significant in this regard: both cases show that temporary protection is not simply a matter of legal status, but also of long-term social cohesion, labour market participation, and public service capacity.

Three policy priorities emerge from this analysis. First, international financing should not be directed solely towards emergency humanitarian assistance, but also towards long-term investments that strengthen local service capacity. Schools, primary health care services, municipal social assistance mechanisms, employment centres, and integrated service points should be supported in ways that include both Venezuelans and host communities. This approach can reduce perceptions of resource competition and prevent integration from being framed as a zero-sum issue.

Second, the transition from regular status to formal employment should be strengthened. Possession of a PPT may not be sufficient on its own to encourage employers to formally hire migrants. Recognition of qualifications, skills-matching programmes, employer incentives, documentation counselling, entrepreneurship support, financial inclusion, and access to labour rights mechanisms are therefore essential. Protection and integration policies should also be designed together for women, children, informal workers, and groups at risk of trafficking and exploitation.

Third, social cohesion policies should be treated not as a complementary component of migration governance but as one of its central pillars. The criminalisation of Venezuelans, the use of migrants as scapegoats for economic problems, or the attribution of public service shortcomings to the presence of migrants can undermine both social peace and integration objectives. Data-driven public communication, local dialogue mechanisms, anti-discrimination measures, and visible support programmes for host communities are therefore necessary.

In conclusion, Colombia's temporary protection model for Venezuelans remains one of the most inclusive migration policy experiments in the world. By encouraging regular status rather than penalising irregularity, the model has created a more manageable framework for both migrants and the state. Yet its success will depend not only on its

legal innovation, but also on whether that innovation is matched by socioeconomic integration. The comparison with Türkiye is instructive in this respect: even when temporary protection is initially designed as an emergency humanitarian response, it can gradually produce long-term consequences for permanence, social cohesion, employment, and public services. The Colombian case should therefore be understood not as a completed success story, but as a powerful laboratory demonstrating both the possibilities and limits of moving from protection to integration.

More fundamentally, the Colombian experience suggests that the effectiveness of temporary protection should be assessed not only by the legal status it grants but by the institutional pathways it creates towards long-term inclusion. As displacement crises become increasingly protracted, the distinction between humanitarian protection and development policy is likely to become progressively less meaningful. Migration governance will therefore depend as much on strengthening institutions and local capacity as on the legal instruments that initially provide protection.

The broader lesson for other countries is clear: progressive migration policy is not only about opening doors, but also about enabling people to build dignified, productive, and secure lives after they pass through them.



(Fermin Torrano - Anadolu Agency)