Political Crisis and International Migration

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Abstract

Since crises entail dire situations calling for immediate action, scholarly attention leans to displaced populations' pressing needs and state responses. Relevant studies and specialized handbooks offer useful concepts around facing humanitarian, migration, and refugee crises. But ample room exists to focus on leaders who create, exaggerate, or do not stop crises that cause people to move. Getting at one root issue of displacement requires not imagining benevolent democratic leaders but instead stepping into an autocratic mindset. In what ways do state-led actions lead to political crisis and migration? I define the attributes and scope of *political crisis* then explore three of the largest contemporary international displacements: from Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria. While invasion and conflict are often linked to displacement, autocratization is less so; I suggest political crisis as a productive lens for unpacking chains of cause (crisis), effect (migration), and response (policy).

Keywords political crisis, international migration, displacement, Ukraine, Venezuela, Syria

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> "The aim of this paper is neither to diagnose some new and
> exciting version of 'crisis', nor to evaluate and adjudicate between
> the relative merits of the existing multiplicity of crisis-concepts."
> Holton (1987, p. 503)

Introduction

The current definitions and analyses of humanitarian, migration, and refugee crises tend to conflate the key concepts within these terms. An example is Europe's "migration crisis" or "refugee crisis" in popular discourse, terms originally intended to mean a crisis that resulted in migration but were then converted to imply that migration itself was the crisis. When scholars recognize this, it is a disservice to refer to 'Europe's so-called migration crisis' or to put 'migration crisis' in quotations, instead of choosing clear and accurate concepts. Like Holton in the epigraph, I do not aim to diagnose new crises nor to evaluate their portrayals. Instead I ask, how do state-led actions lead to political crisis and migration? It is imperative to separate the cause (crisis), effect (migration), and response (policy) to avoid erroneous causality. To untangle this conflation, I focus on how leaders create, exaggerate, and exacerbate crises that involve international migration.

Worldwide, displacement totals 117.3 million people (UNHCR, 2024a). Most remain within a country—labelled internally displaced persons, or IDPs—while others cross international borders as asylum-seekers and refugees. I concentrate on *international* displacement (about 43% of all displaced) because I am interested in the involvement of political leaders from more than one state. The spirit behind their actions around political crisis to some extent reflects democratic versus autocratic tendencies. But the image of people moving away from autocratic regimes and being accepted as refugees in western democracies is highly distorted from reality. Combining authoritarianism with migration governance literature, I examine state actors who sometimes instigate or maintain political crises.

I define *political crisis* as a negative destabilizing situation that breaks normality and threatens a state's functioning or survival (conceptualized in Table 1). I link this to international migration by examining the causal chain of crisis → migration → policy in Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria— the origin countries of the largest international displacements, as of 2024 (see Table A1 in the Appendix).[1] A simplified version of each case's main cause was respectively invasion, autocratization, and civil war, and people went primarily to neighboring and regional countries. Whereas war and conflict have long been recognized as causing large-scale displacement—evident through the origins of the international refugee regime and current definitions of asylum seekers and refugees—autocratization has not. Political crisis thus serves as a lens through which to analyze seemingly different cases involving large-scale international displacement.

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[1] Afghanistan, Sudan, and Palestine rank thereafter, but only Afghanistan has a comparable number of internationally displaced (see Table A1). However, it differs from the top three since its displacement spreads over four decades due to conflict and instability (UNHCR, 2024c), so I exclude it from the analysis.

I.   Crisis and Migration: What's Known, What's Missing

The term crisis carries a long history with origins in law, medicine, and theology—which state and military leaders started to apply to the political realm in the seventeenth century (Koselleck, 1972/2006). A crisis emerged as a situation of non-normality that called for immediate response; the urgency of a medical diagnosis requiring a life or death decision, from moral choices that could lead to eternal salvation or damnation (Holton, 1987; Koselleck, 1972/2006). Then centuries of interpretations mixing religion, science, morality, and politics led to Koselleck (1972/2006, p. 372) noting that *crisis* became, "a structural signature of modernity", which modernity here refers to the 1770s onwards (for more on historic crisis literature, see Appendix 2). At its most basic conceptual level, Lindley (2016, p. 4) outlines the defining features of crises as situations that are "not normal" and "bad." Despite some uses implying permanency, crises have a beginning and end, they are marked by uncertainty, and require immediate action. Yet such features have been blurred from conceptual widening and overuse of the concept. These issues have only been exacerbated by linking crisis to migration.

Crisis and migration share a reciprocal causal relation (Cantat, Pécoud, & Thiollet, 2023; Menjívar, Ruiz, & Ness, 2019a), making it sensible to study them together. Combining them, studies and specialized handbooks have coined and conceptualized terms such as humanitarian crisis, refugee crisis, migration crisis, crisis migration, as well as migration as crisis (Betts, 2014; Lindley, 2014, 2016; Martin, Weerasinghe, & Taylor, 2014a, 2013; McAdam, 2014b, 2014a; Menjívar, Ruiz, & Ness, 2019b; Menjívar et al., 2019a). International migration here refers to voluntary and forced (i.e., displacement), which is internal or international. While associating crisis with migration has a long history, in Europe the concept of *migration crisis* arose in the 2014–2015 period (Cantat et al., 2023).

Both academics and policy implementers recognize the large overlaps between humanitarian, migration, and refugee crises. Part of the conflation or confusion of crisis is due to the multidimensional causes and effects of contemporary human movement (Menjívar et al., 2019a). From the perspective of individuals and households, regardless of what status they may receive, they move when they reach a 'tipping point,' when they can no longer endure the crisis (McAdam, 2014a). Martin and colleagues (2014b) highlight that people move as a direct response to certain events, while other people will move since they anticipate harm that is coming (granted it is difficult to prove events that have yet to happen). Given the focus on displaced people, there is naturally a humane emotional aspect, which becomes part of the call for action. Returning to Koselleck's (1972/2006, p. 384) historical account, "Because of these emotional overtones, crisis loses its theoretical rigor." The same comes from overusing the term, conflating it with other salient topics, and fueling the fire through emotional appeal. This partly explains why, "… [migration crisis] became a generic way of referring to different episodes across time and space, and thus led to a reframing of preexisting realities" (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 10). My framework steps away from the emotional aspect and generic framing.

Offering a higher-level framework for what Weiner (1997) calls *global migration crisis*, the concept has five dimensions: 1) control over entry; 2) absorption of migrants and refugees; 3) international relations; 4) international regimes and institutions; and 5) moral considerations. These cover aspects of a country's migration governance regime and its state-state relations regarding international migration, of which crisis could emerge around any the dimensions. Instead, a more intuitive frame could be the (un)desirable and selective mechanisms that structure immigration governance strategies and crisis framing, which can be inclusionary ('we have to help them!') or exclusionary ('keep them out!'). Such public and political responses are always nuanced since the same decisionmakers may offer help to *some* of those affected—perhaps the most 'desirable,' 'vulnerable,' or 'deserving.' For instance, countries may select certain persons (e.g., women and children but not men or non-nationals of the origin country), groups (e.g., to fill certain labor market shortages; refugees but not migrants, or vice versa), or numbers (e.g., setting quotas).

States apply selectivity not only to migrants but also refugees—countering widespread recognition and agreements to protect asylum seekers—underlining Fitzgerald and Arar's (2018) point that the assumptions behind separating refugee from migration movement are questionable. The legal migrant-refugee binary is blurry as well, in part because states differ in their laws and practices (Abdelaaty & Hamlin, 2022; Brumat & Finn, under review; Hamlin, 2021; Hammoud-Gallego & Freier, 2023). To be clear, contemporary immigration, refugee, and citizenship regimes tend to select the most desirable foreigners—and use racist and discriminatory practices to do so—but is a mistake to only focus on these characteristics when it comes to analyzing how states classify foreigners. For individuals, assuming rationality, people who are able will indeed move away from the crisis to avoid present and future harm and instability. Instead of trying to determine the cause or trigger of movement (including to then classify and label them), my baseline is political crisis as a driver of migration to analyze state-led actions to create, worsen, or at least not end the crisis.

The last strand of relevant literature comes from international relations; it introduces state-led actions of *coercive engineering of migration* (Greenhill, 2010) and transactional forced migration (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023). States can generate or manipulate a crisis by controlling the movement of people, such as by transporting large groups to another border (Rosell & Finn, 2024). Alternatively, poorer states hosting foreigners can seek to profit from wealthier states, such as demanding financing, known as *refugee rentierism* (Frost, 2024; Tsourapas, 2017, 2021). The dynamics that unfold between states at the intersection of migration-related policies and with other interests such as security and economics, entails the concept of *migration diplomacy* (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Thiollet, 2011; Tsourapas, 2021). State actors or leaders can (threaten to) use human mobility to negotiate tangible or intangible goods from another state. This literature mostly concerns itself with how states use migration to cause crisis and its effect on state-state relations.

The Need for Clarity

Three principal problems exist regarding how crisis and migration are presented and analyzed in the literature. First is the focus on **the displaced** (the result), prioritized over analyzing who or what forced such displacement (the cause). The research aim in the former is the pressing issue of policy responses, so the cause of movement comes secondary to defining policy instruments for the international community to react to displacement. Aid-giving organizations and states understandably remain apolitical to provide relief. But this captures only one of the features of crisis, that of immediate response. To more holistically study political crisis as a casue of international migration, I make a first attempt of focusing on the overlooked actions occurring, a) when states use non-state actors to cause or exacerbate political crises, b) with and between state actors internal and external to the political crisis, and c) via state-to-state relations.

Second is the **conceptual stretching** that results in so many scenarios being perceived or portrayed as crisis. The literature has noted this for many decades. Rather than stretching occurring in the classic Sartori (1970) way of maintaining a concept's number of properties but labeling more cases of the concept, I see the source as the lack or laziness on the prior step of defining and conceptualizing the term. Overuse desensitizes the situation, thus reducing the urgency for action and the unusuality of the situation. Moreover, not knowing its attributes and using the concept profusely eliminates its usefulness.

Third is the **conceptual conflation** that occurs when crisis and migration are combined into one term, such as 'migration crisis' and 'crisis migration.' In her conclusion on conceptualizing the latter, McAdam (2014a, p. 49) states, "… there is a risk that the language of 'crisis' may serve to pathologize all movement…" and that, "the conflation of 'crisis' with 'migration' may be used to imply that movement itself is the crisis, rather than the crisis being embodied in the circumstances from which people are moving." This is correct and as alluded to in the present Introduction, political and popular understandings—evident in speeches, media, and rhetoric—confuse the subparts embodied in these terms. When people are put in danger or their life or livelihoods are at risk, a humanitarian crisis arises, which parallels but remains separate from political crisis. Not being synonymous calls for conceptual separation and a return to the original uses of crisis in the political sphere (Koselleck, 1972/2006). It is thus imperative to conceptually separate the cause (crisis), effect (migration), and response (policy) to avoid erroneous causality.

II. Political Crisis: Uses and Conceptual Dimensions

Similar conceptual distortion has also occurred to *political crisis*. Many studies use political crisis alongside other concepts such as ethnicity in Cote d'Ivoire (Toungara, 2001), unrest in Ethiopia (Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2019), and political conflict in Egypt (Shukrullah, 1989). In a research report on Madagascar, political crisis is described as ongoing and continued and seems synonymous with political instability (Ploch & Cook, 2012). It also had a complex series of causes, as did the political crisis in South Sudan with a power struggle and factional fighting in 2013 but with political tensions from the 1990s, unresolved with a 2005 peace agreement (Johnson, 2014). The term has referred

to a foreign capital shock to Brazil's equity market in 2012, involving strong political instability due to corruption and the 2008 financial crisis (Hillier & Loncan, 2019). Political crisis is used in the title and throughout an analysis of media framing of Ukraine, although Baysha and Hallahan (2004) omit a definition of what it refers to. López Maya (2013) also fails to define political crisis but nonetheless offers an insightful analysis of Venezuela post-Chavismo, starting in 1999. Such varied uses have thoroughly decreased the usefulness of the concept. I instead suggest a more minimal definition and conceptualization that more clearly demarcates the scope.

Political crisis is a negative destabilizing situation that breaks the status quo and threatens a state's functioning or survival. The threat could weaken or destroy established political institutions, governance, or systems. Like other crises, political crises may arise suddenly or slowly emerge; they may be short-lived or stretch over an extended period. They have an end point, although consensus on it may differ, and afterwards, the normality may not reflect the pre-crisis normal. Unlike other crises (e.g., medical, moral, cultural, or private-sector financial crises), state leaders have a major role in causing, worsening, or not stopping the situation.[2]

To conceptualize political crisis, Table 1 lists the first dimension of showing discontinuity, which can be measured by pinpointing a change from normality (i.e., the status quo or normal times) to non-normality, whether the normal situation had been desirable or not.[3] The second dimension is being negative, which can be measured by instability that can be economic, social, or political, with the possibility of violence.

Table 1 Conceptualizing Political Crisis

Two defining features	Two dimensions	Measuring the dimensions
A political crisis - threatens state survival and - state leaders create, exacerbate, or do not end the situation	A political crisis - shows discontinuity and - is negative (for the state in which it occurs)	Discontinuity is marked by the change from normality to non-normality.
		Negative is marked by instability, possibly with violence, which can be reported by individuals, states, or the international community.

It is worth adding two clarifying notes: first, while some *outcomes* of political crisis can be positive (e.g., the collapse of an autocratic state, refugee settlement in a safe country, etc.), the crisis is negative for the country in which is occurs. This again is through taking the mindset of state leaders, rather than individuals; I assume that state leaders want to maintain power and would lose

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[2] This feature differentiates it from crises stemming from natural disasters or some economic crises, which to be sure, have political aspects and reactions, but the role of state leaders is relatively more minor, as compared to nature and markets.

[3] Rather than thinking of necessary versus sufficient conditions, the aspects in Table 1 *describe* what a political crisis is; they do not predict when a political crisis emerges.

it if the state collapses.[4] The possible collapse is a defining feature, following Offe (1976, p. 31) who outlines that crises call into question the structure or identity of a system; since are destructive to the system, I focus on state survival. Second, it is possible that negative and unpredictability could comprise normality in situations, e.g., when conflict and humanitarian crises prolong or in enduring nondemocracy. When violence and instability are the status quo and expected, to pinpoint a political crisis, the measurement would need to mark when discontinuity and instability began that threatened state functioning or survival. For instance, in reports and online overviews the UNHCR repeatedly refers to a "13 year-long crisis" in Syria that began in 2011. But using the suggested conceptualiztion, one can separate these into multiple, albeit two interrelated, consequent crises. The political crisis began after student protests in March 2011 which escalated to violence and in parallel, an economic crisis, then displacement increased after a high-magnitude earthquake in February 2023 (World Vision, 2024).

While the last column in Table 1 outlines how to measure the dimensions, scholars must develop which data fit this in each context. Some examples: a change from normality could come from a coup, announcing a state of emergency, applying a curfew, dissolving congress, abolishing the constitution, arresting political opponents, widespread unavailability of necessities, closing or militarizing the borders, and the list continues. Non-normality can only be recognized once normality is established within an established time and place.

The second dimension is similar; different actors at different moments will report varied answers of a crisis being negative, so more precise properties to pinpoint are instability (always present in political crisis) and violence (sometimes present). Examples would be driving out or executing civil servants, or using violence to enforce the curfew or closed border crossings. In their framework to detect early warnings of political system vulnerabilities, Jenkins and Bond (2001) position the alternative of political crisis as political stabilization.[5] While unfortunately they do not define political crisis and instead focus on state capacity to handle conflict, the relevant takeaway is that political crisis shows *instability* as a key attribute. Once discontinuity marks the onset of political crisis, instability will be present.

Using minimalist dimensions brings benefits and limitations. Widely cast nets leave room for scholars' interpretation. On the one hand, this allows for choosing specific measures that best fit the context under study, which strengthens the applicability of the concept; on the other hand, other scholars may adopt other measures, reducing replicability and accuracy of the concept. In short, this approach of naming and detailing dimensions is perhaps endorsed more by interpretivists than positivists. Regardless, all scholars can avoid confusing political crisis with, for instance, inter-group domestic conflict, political debate around arriving boats in the Mediterranean,

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[4] For example, the Cuban missile crisis lies within the scope conditions listed here thus was a political crisis in Cuba; perhaps individuals who found refuge in the US perceived the situation as positive, but it remains negative in Cuba, given the perspective of Fidel Castro.

[5] "Civil contention and state repression are not destabilizing per se. Rather it is the simultaneous combination of these with violent contention that leads to internal political crises and, alternatively, to political stabilization" (Jenkins & Bond, 2001, p. 3).

and politicized border spectacles. While any (humanitarian, migration, refugee, climate) situation can be politicized (e.g., by politicians, groups, or the media), not all will stem from a political crisis since earthquakes, floods, or other natural disasters may be the cause of migration and displacement.

Elsewhere, political crisis has also been used after a decrease in voter turnout or electoral competition, or with a change in cabinet members. The last was reported by Koselleck (1972/2006, p. 369) referring to a change of cabinet in Paris in 1819; despite this historic example, my scope puts stricter conceptual bounds. Based on my proposed definition, the event of low turnout in an election does not constitute a political crisis. Changing cabinet members or administration would also rarely fit the definition. Such boundaries are meant to avoid the conceptual stretching issues already discussed. While participation and opposition are key defining features of Dahl's polyarchy, they do not usually threaten a state's functioning and survival. If readers accept this bounded conceptualization, I move to address the second research question.

III. Examining Political Crises and International Migration

In what ways do state-led actions lead to political crisis and migration? In the last decades, the three largest incidences of international forced displacement stemmed from Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria. They primarily went to neighboring and regional countries: as of 2024, 6.168 million Ukrainians live across Europe, opposed to 571,000 elsewhere (UN, 2024); of the 7.77 million Venezuelans abroad, 6.59 million are in Latin America and the Caribbean (R4V, 2024); and of the Syrian refugees, 73% live in Turkey (about 3 million), Lebanon (about 785,000), and Jordan (about 650,000) (World Vision, 2024).

The three instances resounded internationally involving forced migration, whether legally recognized as refugees or not. Considering the related events, discourses, representations and practices, Cantat and colleagues (2023) state that only in some cases do the politics of labeling result in international movements instigating the crisis frame:

> … the arrival of millions of Ukrainians in Europe as of 2022, after the invasion of their country by Russia. The European Union (EU) activated a Council Directive to grant them immediate temporary protection, and to allow them to move within Europe—thereby sticking to a *normal* legal framework. This contributed to deflating the **potential political crisis**, in a dramatic contrast with the crisis approach that characterized the arrivals of Syrians as of 2015. (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 2, italics in original, bold added for emphasis)

Studies focused only on the receiving countries (the states making policy to manage displacement arrivals) can frame incoming migratory flows as a crisis or non-crisis, as the above quote conveys. However, here *political crisis* refers not to the origin of out-migration but rather to avoiding one emerging in the EU. Instead, I examine political crisis as the cause of international migration from Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria.

Displacement from Ukraine came during an invasion, from Venezuela during and after autocratization, and from Syria during and after civil war. More specifically, political crisis in Ukraine was due to the Russian invasion, an attack that was led by Putin and highly political since it was reclaiming land and citizens as its own, thus threatening sovereignty and the entire political system in Ukraine. It triggered mass movement that could not go anywhere except West, thus into the EU (responses framed as non-crisis). Political crisis in Venezuela emerged domestically due to Chávez then Maduro who led autocratization and then maintained autocracy, dismantling the political institutions and system. It caused high instability for the population and as the political crisis developed and worsened, violations of human rights such as a widespread lack of food and medicine, continued to push people abroad, mostly to nearby countries (e.g., Colombia and Peru). Political crisis in Syria was also domestic but different, as inequality led to protest then an ongoing civil war that overwhelmed the state, hence threatening its survival; to leave the violence and instability, Syrians went to both neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan) and sought refuge in the EU (most successfully in Germany).

All three locations differ radically, as do their historic backgrounds and micro-level profiles. Ukrainians are mostly white and Christian, Venezuelans Catholic and a mix of skin colors, and Syrians primarily Muslim and Arab, comprising many ethnic groups. Despite differences of states and demographics, they all resulted in high internal and international displacement and migration.[6] Ukraine's political crisis started in 2022, with about 6.7 million people displaced abroad, compared to about 38.2 million domestic population. In Venezuela, it began in 2015, with over 6.5 million people going abroad versus comparably very low internally displaced, calculated at 13,000 in 2023 (IDMC, 2023b; R4V, 2024). In Syria, it was in 2011 resulting again in over 6.5 million people displaced abroad (UNHCR, 2024a). In 2023, 7.2 million people were reported as internally displaced in Syria, second only to Sudan (UNHCR, 2024a); however, the numbers fluctuate over time since they are not all directly related to the civil war or other hostilities but also to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, snowstorms, and drought (IDMC, 2023a).

To be added here: political regime rankings of Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria. International movement was possible and prevalent in these three cases. Yet leaving a violent or unstable country is not always an option, for instance from autocracies, especially with tightly controlled markets. North Korea and the former East Germany are well-known examples of keeping people in, but nationals of many countries must apply for an exit visa, such as to leave China and Russia. Others are immobile if they cannot obtain the documents from their government that are required by another government in order to relocate, being caught in a *paperwork gap* (Besserer Rayas, Finn, & Freier, 2024). Whereas western democracies are known for trying to tighten border controls and implement strict immigration regimes, this concentrates on entry; autocratic states tend to control entry and exit for citizens and foreigners alike, choosing who to grant movement to. In these scenarios, even when a political crisis arises, it does not drive large-scale international migration.

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[6] This analysis considers the most recent data available as of October 2024; some of it dates to end of 2023.

Non-Normality and Instability

Temporality and what comprises normal times are key to unpacking this dimension. A political crisis can be short or long, but it has a beginning and an end, albeit the exact timing may lack consensus among relevant actors (see Appendix 2). Whether normality was desirable or not, its discontinuity marks the beginning and duration of the political crisis. Within, there is an, "*oxymoronic normality* of such contexts of crises, in which conflicts, human mobility, and humanitarian challenges are deeply intertwined" (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 2, emphasis added). While a crisis starts when normality is interrupted (i.e., discontinuity), prolonged situations of crisis and migration become normalized. Crisis per se is not permanent and to regain some analytical usefulness, I follow Holton's (1987) efforts to reaffirm a distinction between normality and crisis.

Instability is meant as a parsimonious term to encapsulate scenarios in which someone's physical wellbeing or financial safety is unpredictable and thus, they face uncertainty. Only in stable situations can individuals and households be certain they will be able to maintain their wellbeing and livelihood. When weather is unpredictable and seasonal rain destroys crops, governments need to have distribution plans; but when hunger is caused because an incumbent is hoarding or restricting the collected or imported products, and rationing inadequate amounts to the population, it is the state leader instilling the instability onto the population. As Sen (1982) outlines, food shortage is not the only reason for famine but ownership and distribution of food can deliberately cause hunger. This again is a situation in which would unsurprisingly cause out-migration and displacement.

According to the Weberian perspective, the state holds a monopoly over violence. This theoretical viewpoint works well with assuming benevolent state leaders who do not use violence unnecessarily or recklessly. Yet worldwide the majority of people—72% as of 2022—live in autocracies (Wiebrecht et al., 2023), which I assume have leaders without democratic ideals to uphold the basic rights of those in the territory. Whereas the humanitarian literature related to displacement steers toward violence among groups, such as ethnic conflicts and civil wars, the state-led top-down violence merits more attention. This includes physical corporeal violence but also other forms, such as legal violence (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012), in which state policies and practices such as crimmigration, criminalization, punitive laws, illegality, forced detention, and deportation are violent.

Taking the three cases, …

1. Ukraine: invasion: another (more powerful) state claimed right to another state's sovereign land and population; sparked more political reaction since the EU and NATO focused on regional/global stability and avoidance of bigger war; Instability from the presence of external violence; overall contained within the country, although claims of so-called migration/refugee crisis in EU (repeated phrases from 2015), but displaced people met with humanitarian framing

2. Venezuela: the incumbents transitioned and maintained autocracy; Instability more common-place in cycles throughout South America due to shifting political landscapes and

changes in political regimes, dictatorships, ideological swings between left and right, extensive socioeconomic inequality, and widespread informal labor markets. During the Maduro crisis, food and medicine shortages in particular

3. Syria: people wanted democracy; protest to civil war; unable to stop or meet civil demands of the Syrian revolution, marked by large-scale uprising and protests; with the presence of internal violence

Touching on the last part of the crisis → migration → policy chain, state-led changes in immigration and refugee regimes that were meant to be temporary can become permanent. This occurred in Poland by keeping militarized border control with Belarus after the temporary 2021 border spectacle (Krępa, Pachocka, Naranowicz, & Jakniunaite, 2024). Examining the local level in Turkey also revealed the institutionalization of migration as crisis since 'extraordinary' measures became normalized (Yavçan & Memişoğlu, 2023). The policies made during non-normality can set a new normality or be used as a political response to a future emergency or crisis.

State Actors

The pertinent actors in these cases are state leaders. In Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky as President of Ukraine was the internal leader facing the invasion led by Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, as external aggressor. In Venezuela, political crisis was instigated by the heads of state, first with Hugo Chávez then Nicolás Maduro. In Syria it was again the head of state, Bashar al-Assad (with tensions dating back to his predecessor, his father, Hafez al-Assad), who lacked the capacity or willingness to respond to the protests prior to the civil war.

Political crises can be created by internal or external state actors, either directly or via cooperative or coerced non-state actors. The three cases also reveal that political crises can be initiated in at least three ways: through state-to-state, state-population, or population-state actions or relations. The former is international whereas the latter two are domestic but often with international repercussions. In the **state-to-state** pattern, the stronger state can cause political crisis in a weaker state, thus threatening the survival of the weaker. In the **state-population** pattern, a strong government or leader can control or repress the society, i.e., use top-down violence against the population; physical violence does not have to be present since inflicting harm on a population also includes, for example, withholding food or necessities. In the last, **population-state**, a society puts pressure on a government or leader by undertaking bottom-up claims making, for instance, through large-scale unrest. As such, external state actors can prompt a political crisis and internal actors can as well, either through top-down actions or by their response to bottom-up demands.

State leaders using violence or causing instability for a population is commonplace, as shown in studies on autocratic institutions and state repression (e.g., Davenport, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Gerschewski, 2013). The latter can serve as a tool to avoid dissent by the masses or elites (Svolik, 2012), which harms or instills fear for anticipated danger of one's life or livelihood (Esberg, 2021). Such events cause out-migration and displacement when people reach their tipping point. Some state actors cause the violence and instability that instigates migration, whereas sometimes it

is their reactions to migrants that causes violence and instability. This can occur in origin, transit, or residence states, as well as elsewhere, such as an outsider aggressor or those involved in engineering coercive migration.

Rather than referring to underlying structural causes, sometimes the roots of political crisis lie in autocratic leaders' targeted repression and instability, leading to the out-migration. Given the number of autocracies in the world, this is not an aspect to ignore while analyzing the links between political crisis and international migration. It is not the same to move because there are no resources (e.g., climate migration) versus having the resources withheld from you. Focusing on who or what caused displacement merits attention because they indicate the inability or unwillingness of a state to protect the people within its territory—they are unable or do not want to resolve the conflicts, uprisings, or implement preventative safety standards or evacuation plans. Inaction to end a crisis can stem not only from lack of funding or capacity but also from unwillingness, requiring again to unimagine only benevolent leaders.

The policy response differed from other states who received the displaced. In Ukraine, the EU took a humanitarian framing and offered temporary stay for Ukrainian nationals. Entry was easy since Ukrainians already had a visa-free entry to the EU. Venezuelans mostly went to neighboring countries, especially Colombia and Peru, which have fluctuated between inclusive and restrictive policies (Besserer Rayas et al., 2024; Freier, 2018; Freier & Doña-Reveco, 2022). Lastly in Syria, the EU policy response was hard entry as asylum seekers.

IV. Critical Discussion

Whereas *migration crisis* seems to point a punitive finger at the victims, emphasizing states rather than people, analyzing *political crisis* flips the blame game on its head and points to state-led actions within the political crisis events. The cases showed that both internal or external state actors are capable of instigating or exacerbating political crises. It can arise from actions or relations that are state-to-state (Ukraine-Russia), state-population (Venezuela top-down), or population-state (Syria bottom-up)

Not all state leaders want to avoid or end various types of crises. As the migration diplomacy literature outlines, states can use people as bargaining chips to gain resources (see, e.g., Greenhill, 2010; Tsourapas, 2021). Ongoing strife can also attract altruist donations. Nor are all leaders benevolent, as Chávez drove the Venezuelan population to scrape for food and medicine while he lived in plenty. Benevolent economic policies are not restricted to democracies, as authoritarian leaders have also created state wealth, such as Augusto Pinochet for Chile and Park Chung-Hee for South Korea (Edwards, 2023; Gilson & Milhaupt, 2011, respectively).

After political crisis causes international migration, there is a plethora of state actors who become involved in the origin, transit, and residence countries, as well as aggressor and allied states. Governments consider regional, supranational, and international obligations, such as bi- and multilateral agreements. Broader state relations and geopolitics thus play critical roles alongside the meso-level factors such as the incumbent's capacity regarding finances, knowledge, and structures

of governance, and micro-level aspects such as the arrival's similarities with population. To prevent or end the political crisis, state actors or leaders need the resources to achieve their governance strategies, and they must want to. This applies two-fold in terms of state actions: a) crisis management by the state experiencing the political crisis, and b) in the case of international movement (migration and displacement), changes in a state's migration, refugee, and citizenship regimes. Such reactions were present in the three scenarios and show the importance of governance, money, and willingness during political crisis involving international migration.

All these aspects result in responses that adapt (existing) rules and procedures or create (new) legal instruments. The similarities and differences prompt reflection on three macro factors: geopolitics, migration, refugee, and mobility regimes, and democracy.

Geopolitics

Regarding policy responses, analyses of current immigration and refugee regimes, as well as strategic decisions within migration governance, are most holistic when they consider both microlevel characteristics and macrolevel structures. Some statements consider only the former, for instance, "… the treatment Syrians and Ukrainians, for example, has been interpreted as yet another indication of how racialized and postcolonial hierarchies shape the reception of people on the move" (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 5). To be clear, (un)conscious discrimination, including systematic racialization and postcolonial hierarchies, is an element of migration governance processes and outcomes (for the US, see Matos, 2023). In addition, state actors who adapt and enforce laws within these regimes also consider their state-to-state relations, international standing, and (bi-, multi-, supra-national) agreements. So unlike international relations as a dimension around which crisis can emerge—as in Weiner's (1995, 1997) framework—here is it how considering international relations dynamics influences the framing and reaction to crises.

It is to say, EU states reacted differently to Ukrainians not only because they live nearby, share some characteristics, and already had visa-free EU travel, but also (perhaps primarily) since Russia's position and political power is much more dangerous than Syria's for the EU. The policy response that had to arise (the acceptance of Ukrainians in the EU) was bolstered by politicians and the media framing the groups differently. The policy instigated the framing, not vice versa. Microlevel characteristics of likeness, as well as stressing that the group was mostly women and children, called for solidarity and openness for Ukrainians.[7] But these characteristics were presented alongside political and popular discourse of Russia's unjust invasion, very clearly putting the fault and responsibility on Putin.[8] Despite most people knowing little about Russian politics, the serious repercussions of such an invasion were reminiscent of Cold War-era fears. Both the micro and

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[7] Despite humanitarian framing, the policy response was intriguingly not refugee status, suggesting that other factors are at play within migration governance regimes.

[8] While beyond the scope of this analysis, it is noteworthy that state actors can opt to strategically name one villain to focus society's attention on (e.g., Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein), which can then lend public support for state actions.

macro factors overall made it easier for these societies to accept the policy response of inclusion rather than exclusion.

There are related situations at the intersection of political power and international (forced) migration in which geopolitics play a large role, namely in coercive engineered migration (Greenhill, 2010) and refugee rentierism (e.g., Tsourapas, 2021). Such strategies play out on state-to-state and international stages in the ongoing postcolonial period, as investigated in the fairly recent literature on migration diplomacy (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Thiollet, 2011). Despite *internal* displacement occurring in higher numbers than international displacement, only the latter comprises diplomacy. While I hold a normative standpoint that it is immoral to use (threats of) migration and migrants as bargaining chips—since displaced people are not weapons (Marder, 2018) and hold inherent rights—it is clear that global South leaders are using any tool at hand to challenge the long-standing hierarchies within global structures of power.[9] Both the tactics of coercive migration diplomacy (Rosell & Finn, 2024) and political crises as causes of international migration are shaped by, and can significantly change, contemporary hierarchies of state and regional power. They can also both shape the already vast differences around the world in access to mobility and legal status.

Rights Regimes

Reacting to unexpected and large-scale displacement, (possible) receiving states create new instruments or adjust existing visas or statuses to cater to the newly displaced, or do not accept arrivals. They decide which legal statuses to offer, how fast people can obtain it, who is eligible (e.g., individual basis, household, collective recognition), and the status duration. As with other practices within migration and citizenship regimes, these greatly depend on one's nationality and the origin country's geographic location.

Temporary visas may be the fastest to arrange via Executive decree, although the state will afterwards need to design renewal procedures and pathways to other legal statuses, particularly when violence or instability proceeds longer than initially expected. Responses to Venezuelan arrivals by nearby South American countries started as non-crisis. State leaders drew from international and regionals norms and instruments, such as the tendency toward adopting regularization processes and applying a visa waiver through the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement,[10] though Venezuela was not a member (Acosta, Blouin, & Freier, 2019; Brumat, 2023). Colombia offered initially a temporary status but extended this to ten years and opened pathways to nationality both by jus soli birth and naturalization for selected people (Besserer Rayas et al., under review). Brazil introduced *prima facie* recognition of Venezuelans as refugees but gave them

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[9] In parallel, Adamson and Han (2024) outline that China, India, and Turkey use diaspora governance policies as a tool for promoting their geopolitical agendas, including to spread their global influence.

[10] The South American free mobility regime has highly liberal policies of residence rights (Acosta, 2018); for a translation to English of the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement, see Acosta and Finn (2019). These were developed within "the context of both political and moral opposition to restrictive shifts in EU extra-regional migration governance" (Brumat & Freier, 2023, p. 3060).

the choice to instead apply for migrant status (Brumat & Finn, under review; Brumat & Geddes, 2023). But as numbers grew, more of a crisis framing developed, which came with restrictive policy responses and border closures.

On the other side of the Atlantic, EU policy responses also used existing instruments; but the responses to Ukrainians occurred within a humanitarian framing while to Syrians within crisis framing. Whereas Ukrainians could enter the EU under a current visa waiver, Syrians could not. Given Ukrainians' semi-presence in the territory (because of visa-free EU entry) and existing relation (partly given Ukraine's geographic position of sharing a border with four EU Member States), accepting larger numbers of Ukrainians and offering them a temporary status was a feasible and natural legal development. In the absence of such relations with Syrians and location of Syria, the policy response came from the refugee regime and considered them as asylum seekers. These aspects of regional mobility regimes are relevant to the current study since Ukrainians and Syrians differed in their access to entry to the EU and that of Venezuelans to the rest of South America. Whether for micro, macro, or a combination of such factors, the fact that there could be such a cruel individual-level differentiation between those fleeing unstable and violent countries—accepting some while rejecting others—leads me to the third and final theme of democratic ideals.

Democracy

The undertones of the analysis provided insights into the role of democratic ideals in the contemporary world since the three displacements spurred different reactions from democracies. When it comes to foreigners, democratic ideals certainly have their limits. These bounds are evident in the selectivity mechanisms built into migration and citizenship regimes, such as quotas, types of visas, point systems, and banned nationalities or individuals. Such selectivity has seeped into refugee regimes as well, despite long-standing commitments for international protection, such as by signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. What does this say about democracy being used as a benchmark for moral righteousness? Democratic ideals seem to be a recurring reason for certain migration governance choices made on a moral high ground yet become shallow façades on the following five fronts.

First, given that most people do not live in democracy, why would democratic states give different access to entry and residence rights for people arriving from non-democracies? Of the people accepted, why would they offer different statuses? Decisions point to both micro-level traits (e.g., the extent to which one's skin color, language, and religion match the majority group) and macro-level structures and pressures. A heuristic and physical symbol connecting these two is the passport one holds, which then determines inclusion or exclusion within rights regimes.

Second, relatively wealthier democracies in the global North, which claim more efficient migration governance, house far fewer forced migrants as compared to global South countries. Third, many democracies' restrictive and exclusionary policies are the reasons behind dangerous border crossings and undocumented populations who thus lack access to basic rights, for which they criticize non-democracies.

Fourth, some democracies' military interventions and political meddling (namely, the US in Central and South America) were the sources of instability and violence that caused international migration, which entry thereafter is refused at the democracy's borders. Fifth and finally, colonial legacies reign over democratic ideals when class and racialized legal systems inherited post-independence from British, French, and Iberian empires determine current legal practices and rights distribution (see McNamee, 2023; Owolabi, 2023). Similar systematic discrimination lies within the foundations of the US immigration regime (Matos, 2023).

It seems that when political crisis drives international migration, receiving states react differently to it depending on the location and events within the political crisis, as well as their perceived moral obligation and willingness to help. The political crisis-international migration nexus is situated within complex networks of people and goods moving across modern nation states' borders. Movement is already vulnerable to existent policies and procedures in national and regional migration, refugee, and mobility regimes. The size, substance, and frequency of these market-like movements also depend on states' international relations and geopolitics, embodied within the power dynamics of global hierarchies and within the push for decolonialization.

Conclusion

A *political crisis* is a negative destabilizing situation that breaks the status quo and threatens a state's functioning or survival. State leaders can play major roles in causing, worsening, or not stopping the situation—or convince non-state actors to carry out these aims. Political crises may arise suddenly or slowly emerge, be short-lived or stretch over an extended period, and have a beginning and end, although afterwards may not reflect the pre-crisis normal.

Previous loose usage lacked defining attributes, making for a nebulous concept with overstretched and vague boundaries. This framework has tried to overcome such conceptual conflation and confusion, prevalent in political speeches, media reports, and popular social discourse that blame migrants and point to them as the problem and crisis. Terms such as *migration crisis* were not intended as such. To avoid erroneous causal understandings, I suggest separating the cause (crisis), effect (migration), and response (policy). Political crisis serves as a lens through which to analyze causal chains in seemingly different cases of international migration flows.

Moving away from imagining benevolent democratic leaders, in what ways do state-led actions lead to political crisis and migration? Internal or external actions that threaten a state's survival, break normality, and create instability mark a political crisis, which can cause internal and international migration. Leaders may create, exacerbate, or not end political crises. They may occur in any political regime and policy responses to the resulting international migration do not necessarily reflect democratic ideals and international norms.

It is scholarly, and ethically, insufficient to analyze the scenarios in Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria as 'triggers' for migration or to classify them only as humanitarian crises from 'human-made hazards.' They are at their core political and caused huge political repercussions at their respective national, regional, and international spheres. I classify them as political crises since each showed

discontinuity (as in a break from normality) and was *negative* (showing instability, possibly accompanied by violence) during which leading state actors played pivotal roles and each threatened state survival. Applying this analytical label allows for a more precision between normality versus crisis within current political institutions and systems.

While I have studied political crisis as cause, it leaves room for other studies to address the reciprocal possibility that (internal or international) migration can also cause political crisis, albeit in different ways (following, e.g., Menjívar et al., 2019b). Specifically, "crises in origin regions provoke migration; migration makes for crises in receiving countries; and states misgovern the entire process in a way that exacerbates crises" (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 2). When anti-immigrant parties speak of a migration crisis, they intentionally frame foreigners as problems, portraying immigration itself as a crisis that jeopardizes the mythical homogenous nation of good citizens. Another example is an overwhelming lack of necessities in countries or camps holding large numbers of displaced people, which causes another humanitarian crisis; it can cause a political crisis in the receiving country when, for instance, dividing scarce resources becomes politicized, fractioning the party system or risking government collapse. In such scenarios, the state may engage in refugee rentierism or other coercive migration diplomacy tactics, to gain additional financing and resources. Hence, multiple and interrelated crises can be disentangled.

Underlining the reciprocal relation between political crisis and international migration offers a new lens for scholars interested in analyzing the political side of crisis and state involvement in causing, manipulating, and reacting to international movement. Many political scientists and international relation scholars study the origins, events, and outcomes of democratic backsliding, autocratization, outsider or populist parties and leaders, protests, unrest, and uprisings; but more work is needed to connect how, when, and who moves within, and because of, these contexts. I thus invite other scholars to explore these causal relationships across borders.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Table A1 Number of People Fleeing, Top 10 Countries, 2023/2024

Country	Internally Displaced	**Internationally Displaced**	Total Displaced
Ukraine	3,689,000	**≈6,752,000**	10,452,000
Venezuela	≈13,000	**≥6.59 million**	7,774,494
Syria	7,248,000	**≈6.5 million**	≈13.8 million
Afghanistan	4,187,000	≈6.4 million	≈10.9 million
Sudan	9,053,000	≈1.9 million	11,414,453
Palestine	1,710,000	–	6,022,100
Myanmar	2,625,000	≈1.3 million	≈3.9 million
South Sudan	1,121,000	2,317,078	≈3,438,000
DR Congo	6,734,000	1,128,014	≈7.8 million
Somalia	≈3.9 million	1,021,268	≈4.9 million

Sources: Top 10 countries at the start of 2024, as reported by the Norwegian Refugee Council, www.nrc.no/global-figures/#statistics (accessed 30 October 2024), which combines UNHCR and UNRWA data. Re-ordered after adding data from IDMC (2023b), R4V (2024), UNHCR (2024b, 2024a, 2024c), and World Vision (2024).

Notes: ≈ means approximately. – indicated missing data. These numbers tend to rapidly change, and this table was created in October 2024. Even at the end of 2023, Ukraine and Venezuelan internationally displaced people were lower than those from Syria and Afghanistan but these inverted in 2024. Of the Venezuelans, 6.59 million are in Latin America and the Caribbean (R4V, 2024) but it is likely that most of the 7.7 million are abroad since IDMC (2023b) reported only 13,000 internally displaced people in Venezuela in 2023. Also note that the top five countries in the table (Ukraine, Venezuela, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan) account for 73% of refugees in the European Union (European Commission, 2024).

Appendix 2 Background on Crisis Literature

While initially a project on crisis migration seemed a natural starting point for the present research, the project's definition of crisis was, "something 'beyond the coping capacity of individuals and the communities in which they reside'" (McAdam, 2014b, p. 44). Since I am interested in crisis as a situation—needed as a foundational concept to discuss political crisis—here I avoid repeating such a line of inquiry that focuses on people rather than the situation. My focus on actors lies with state leaders rather than with (forced) migrants. For this reason, I went farther back in time to briefly recount how the term crisis developed historically first in medical then political ways.

The term crisis indeed carries a long history with origins in law, medicine, and theology— which state and military leaders started to apply to the political realm in the seventeenth century (Koselleck, 1972/2006). A crisis emerged as a situation of non-normality that called for immediate response; the urgency of a medical diagnosis requiring a life or death decision, from moral choices that could lead to eternal salvation or damnation (Holton, 1987; Koselleck, 1972/2006). Centuries of use and interpretations mixing religion, science, morality, and politics led to this takeaway:

> All of these possibilities reveal attempts to develop a single concept limited to the present with which to capture a new era that may have various temporal beginnings and whose unknown future seems to give free scope to all sorts of wishes and anxieties, fears and hope. "Crisis" becomes a structural signature of modernity. (Koselleck, 1972/2006, p. 372)

Modernity here refers to the 1770s onwards. The concept then continued to expand in its interpretations and wide application. Given ongoing uncertainty in the world, such as wars, revolutions, and large-scale structural and state changes, even in the nineteenth century, "the condition of crisis" counterintuitively took on a notion of permanency (Koselleck, 1972/2006, p. 372). Uncertainty has always been a key attribute since the outcome once the crisis passed was unknown and all uses called for immediate action to respond to the crisis. While some refer to an 'ongoing political crisis', implying a prolonged, rather than quick, period, conceptually a *crisis* has a beginning (a 'turning point') and end. They only appear to be ongoing but are actually recurring distinct crises. Overall, a crisis is negative and breaks from perceived normality; it shows discontinuity because it breaks from normality, as in the status quo and what is expected. I maintain these original main properties in my analysis.

Crisis can be conceptualized as either an event or as mechanisms that generate events, which according to Offe (1976), respectively relate to a sporadic versus processual concept. I follow the first since it can be an event or series of events that is, "foreign to the system or destructive to the system" in the sense that crisis is catastrophic (Offe, 1976, pp. 31–32). Once a crisis ends, the situation could return to its previous normality, but it more frequently introduces a new normal, as in newly established institutions or systems to renew or replace old non- or ill-functioning ones.

It is needless to determine a crisis as either perceived versus real, due to what Cantat and colleagues (2023) call "the politics of labeling." Since a crisis is a constructed concept, all crises

exist because they are perceived as such. A logical thought experiment demonstrates this: if leaders and societies considered large-scale displacement a standard part of politics and everyday life, they would not refer to it as a crisis, thus no crisis would exist. The causes and effects would still unfold (i.e., hunger and repression exist in reality) but not be labelled and reacted to as a crisis.

Words matter since, "… once apprehended through a crisis lens, migration is perceived as extraordinary or *abnormal*, which therefore calls for ad hoc measure rather than structural political strategies" (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 17, emphasis added). Political and popular rhetoric around an occurrence framing a crisis, do so in relation to one's subjectivity, to what is perceived as normal and with continuity. What is *normal* may be normatively positive or negative but generally describes what is common and expected, meaning the status quo of how things usually work within a certain place and time. Through a Weberian and Durkheim viewpoint, the distinction lies in normal as regular versus non-normal or irregular as pathological. This relates well to what has become of political crisis and international migration since the use of 'crisis migration' often seems to associate pathological breakdown to social breakdown. Such interpretation mixes the concept's medical and moral origins to the contemporary social world. Decades ago, Holton (1987, p. 503) already noted, "Once virtually everything is perceived to be in more or less unending crisis the possibility arises that we are losing the capacity to discriminate between social pathology or breakdown, on the one side, and social normality and social order on the other." Given its conceptual stretching and conflation, the problem arises of being unable to recognize the defining features of crisis, thus unable to categorize any situation as crisis. These issues have only been exacerbated by linking crisis to migration, which motivated the current analysis.