
Migration on the Periphery

Political Economy and Alternative Governance in
the Colombian side of the Darién Gap

Ewen RIVALLAIN

Thesis under the supervision of Emma TYROU, research and
teaching assistant at Sciences Po Lille (ATER)

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Abstract

This thesis examines the configuration of governance in Colombia's Darién region, a key transit point in one of the world's most dangerous migratory routes. Challenging the dominant discourse that portrays the Darién as an "ungoverned space," the research investigates how political and economic interactions between the Clan del Golfo (CDG) and state actors constitute a form of alternative governance. Through a historical and spatial analysis, the thesis traces the legacy of paramilitary structures following the partial demobilisation of the AUC, revealing how successor groups such as the CDG have embedded themselves in pre-existing networks of power and development. It further explores how the migration economy has become a critical mechanism through which this governance is maintained, shaped by overlapping legal regimes, informal economies, and state non-intervention. The study argues that this interplay not only reproduces extractivist logics of control but also exacerbates the vulnerability of migrants, positioning the Darién as a frontier of state-making and human rights risk. Drawing on the concept of embedded autonomy, the thesis highlights how the state's selective presence facilitates, rather than disrupts, the CDG's consolidation. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on alternative governance, informal migration economies, and the limits of state authority in peripheral territories.

Key words: Darién Gap, migration, alternative governance, embedded autonomy, peripheral development, paramilitary structures, Clan del Golfo

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine la configuration de la gouvernance dans la région du Darién en Colombie, un point de transit clé sur l'une des routes migratoires les plus dangereuses au monde. En remettant en question le discours dominant qui décrit le Darién comme un « espace non gouverné », cette recherche explore la façon dont les interactions politiques et économiques entre le Clan del Golfo (CDG) et les acteurs étatiques constituent une forme de gouvernance alternative. À travers une analyse économique, historique et spatiale, le mémoire retrace l'héritage des structures paramilitaires suite à la démobilisation partielle des forces paramilitaires, révélant comment des groupes successeurs tels que le CDG se sont enracinés dans des réseaux préexistants de pouvoir et de développement. Il examine en outre comment l'économie migratoire est devenue un mécanisme central de cette gouvernance, façonnée par des régimes juridiques imbriqués, des économies informelles et une non-intervention de l'État. L'étude soutient que cette dynamique reproduit des logiques extractivistes de contrôle et accentue la vulnérabilité des personnes migrantes, faisant du Darién une frontière de construction étatique et de risques pour les droits humains. En mobilisant le concept de « autonomie relative », ce travail montre comment la présence sélective de l'État facilite, plutôt qu'elle ne conteste, la consolidation du CDG en tant qu'acteur parallèle de coercition. Il contribue ainsi aux débats sur la gouvernance alternative, les économies informelles de la migration et les limites de l'autorité étatique dans les territoires périphériques.

Mots-clés : Darién, migration, gouvernance alternative, « autonomie relative », développement périphérique, structures paramilitaires, Clan del Golfo.

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List of Acronyms

ACDEGAM: Asociación Campesina de Ganaderos y Agricultores del Magdalena Medio (Association of Middle Magdalena Ranchers and Farmers)

ACCU: Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá)

AUC: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-defence Forces of Colombia)

CDG: Clan del Golfo (Gulf Clan)

CMT: Community Money Transfer

COCMANORTE: Consejo Comunitario Mayor del Norte del Río Baudó

COCMASECO: Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Comunidad Negra de la Cuenca de los ríos Cocoma y Seco

CONVIVIR: Servicios Especiales de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada (Special Vigilance and Private Security Services)

CSIS: Centre for Strategic and International Studies

EGC: Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (Gaitanist Army of Colombia)

ELN: Ejército de Liberación Nacional

EPL: Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)

FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

FIDH: International Federation for Human Rights

FIP: Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Ideas for Peace Foundation)

FP: Frente Popular (Popular Front)

FMD: Foot and Mouth Disease

GBV: Gender-based violence

GNP: Gross national product

HRW: Human Rights Watch

ICBF Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family WellBeing)

ICG: International Crisis Group

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

IDB: Inter-American Development Bank

INDEPAZ: Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Institute for Development and Peace Studies)

IOM: International Organisation for Migration

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MAS: Muerte a Secuestradores (Death to Kidnappers)

MSF: Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders)

NYT: New York Times

ODA: Official Development Assistance

OMT: World Organisation Against Torture

OPEC: Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

ORCCRP: Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

PAH: Pan-American Highway

PCC: Partido Comunista de Colombia (Colombian Communist Party)

PEUD: Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién (Urabá-Darién Strategic Plan)

SAP: Structural Adjustment Programme

SENAFRONT: Servicio Nacional de Fronteras de la República de Panamá
(Panamanian National Border Service)

TPS: Temporary Protected Status

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UP: Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union)

WU: Western Union

Introduction

A humanitarian emergency on a dangerous migration route

The 60-mile stretch of rainforest on the Colombia-Panama border, known as the Darién Gap, is described by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) as “one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world.”¹ The region poses both environmental and human dangers. Migrants face flooding, landslides, disease, and encounters with dangerous wildlife like snakes and crocodiles, all worsened by the dense, humid terrain and lack of clear paths.^{2,3} Obinna’s Conceptual Model of Forced Migration through the Darién identifies key human risks such as migrant smuggling, human trafficking, armed militias, gender-based violence, and death.⁴ According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2023, migrants’ main concerns were physical security (64%), encountering dead bodies (32%), getting lost (24%), caring for dependents (24%), and lacking basic necessities (18%).⁵ Sexual violence is widespread; Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported 113 cases in a single week in February 2024, from intrusive body searches to mass rape.⁶ Armed gangs – often youth from indigenous communities - are identified as the primary perpetrators, particularly on Panama’s side of the border.⁷

Despite these dangers, the Darién Gap remains the only land route connecting South and Central America, crossed by over 520,000 people in 2023, and becoming a crossroads of international aid actors.⁸ The sharp increase since 2021 prompted the UN

¹ Runde, D. and Bryja, T. (2024). Mind the Darién Gap, Migration Bottleneck of the Americas. [online] Available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-05/240516_Runde_Darien_Gap.pdf?VersionId=XONWYsj9xeB6dp0EvpETGwaSZ4S18QzL. Pg 2

² Heath, V. (2024). Why is the Darien Gap so dangerous? [online] Geographical. Available at: <https://geographical.co.uk/science-environment/why-is-the-darien-gap-so-dangerous>.

³ Roy, D. (2024). Crossing the Darien Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>.

⁴ Obinna, D.N. (2024). Camino de la Muerte: Crossing the Darién Gap & Migration in the Americas. *Migration and Development*, 13(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/21632324241267053>. Pg 9

⁵ UNHCR (2023). Darien Panama: Mixed Movements Protection Monitoring - January - December 2023. [online] Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/105569>.

⁶ MSF (2024). Lack of action sees sharp rise in sexual violence on people transiting Darien Gap. [online] Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International. Available at: <https://www.msf.org/lack-action-sees-sharp-rise-sexualviolence-people-transiting-darien-gap-panama>.

⁷ International Crisis Group (2023). Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap. [online] www.crisisgroup.org. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-central-america/102-bottleneck-americas-crime-andmigration>. Pg 10

⁸ Reuters (2024). Record half-million migrants crossed Latin America’s dangerous Darien Gap in 2023. Reuters. [online] 3 Jan. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/record-half-million-migrants-crossed-latinamericas-dangerous-darien-gap-2023-2024-01-03/>.

to declare a humanitarian emergency, leading bodies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR to focus aid efforts on the Colombia-Panama border.⁹ ¹⁰ Since then, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Doctors of the World, and others have been active on both sides of the gap. The crisis has also drawn international attention, with the U.S.A supporting SENAFRONT, Panama's border patrol, through financial and technical aid, funding humanitarian projects via USAID, and partnering with Panama on migration management strategies.¹¹

Colombia has a long history of displacement. As of 2024, nearly seven million people were internally displaced due to a decades-long conflict between left-wing insurgents, the state, and paramilitary groups.¹² In the early 2000s, the main paramilitary force, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), demobilised, and a historic peace deal was signed in 2016 with Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). However, efforts to integrate other armed groups have struggled, and displacement surged again, reaching 278,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2023.¹³ While Colombians represented only 6% of mixed migration arrivals in Panama in 2024, most migrants were Venezuelans fleeing Nicolás Maduro's regime, seeking passage to North America.¹⁴ Many organisations blame poor humanitarian conditions on a lack of state presence in the Darién, leaving migrants in the hands of criminals. In 2022, Gustavo Petro was elected Colombia's first left-wing president, campaigning on addressing the structural inequalities that empowered armed groups. In response to the crisis in the Darién and broader insecurity, Petro promised to break from past non-interventionist policies by restoring state presence and protecting

⁹ UN News (2023). Protect those on the move using deadly Darién crossing | UN News. [online] news.un.org. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144502>.

¹⁰ UN (2023). UN / Americas Migrant Darién. [online] UNifeed. Available at: <https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d315/d3153797> [Accessed 12 May 2025].

¹¹ Pelcastre, J. (2025). *Committed to Regional Security: Panama, U.S. Combat Malign Smuggling Networks, Curb Irregular Migration*. [online] Diálogo Américas. Available at: <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/committed-to-regional-security-panama-us-combat-malign-smuggling-networks-curb-irregular-migration/> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2025].

¹² UNHCR (2024). *Colombia situation*. [online] Global Focus. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/colombia-situation>.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Migración Panama (2025). *Estadísticas – Migración Panamá*. [online] www.migracion.gob.pa. Available at: <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/> [Accessed 6 May 2025].

human rights.¹⁵ However, the situation in the Darién has only intensified throughout his term.

In 2024, three key elections shaped the regional context: Maduro's re-election in Venezuela in May, the election of Panamanian president Mulino in July, and the return of Donald Trump as U.S. president in November. These political changes have reshaped the Darién situation - there is little hope for a resolution in Venezuela soon, Panama announced the "closing" of the Darién Gap, and Trump pledged strict border enforcement and mass deportations.¹⁶ Since 2025, the direction of migration through the Darién has reversed, with more people crossing from Panama back into Colombia by sea, driven by increased difficulties entering the U.S. via Mexico.¹⁷ This reversal shows how the crisis is tied to broader regional politics, linking Colombia, Panama, and North and South America. Understanding migration through the Darién requires viewing it within this complex, multi-level political context, shown by previous research, which we now offer a review of.

Literature review

Two main approaches to studying migration through the Darién have emerged: migration studies and the international criminal perspective.

I. Migration Studies Beyond "Push and Pull" Factors

From the perspective of migration studies, the focus has been on the push and pull factors driving migration through the Darién. The concept of push and pull factors, introduced by Lee in 1966, identifies factors that drive individuals to leave their place of origin (such as economic hardship or conflict) and those that attract them to a new location (such as work or political freedom).¹⁸ Migration is understood as the result of a convergence of these factors, along with intervening obstacles and opportunities

¹⁵ InfoBae (2022). *Gustavo Petro pidió presencia estatal para asistir a los migrantes en el Darién*. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2022/09/29/gustavo-petro-pidio-presencia-estatal-para-asistir-a-los-migrantes-en-el-darien/> [Accessed 11 May 2025].

¹⁶ Bush-Joseph, K. (2025). *In First 100 Days, Trump 2.0 Has Dramatically Reshaped the U.S. Immigration System, but Is Not Meeting Mass Deportation Aims*. [online] migrationpolicy.org. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-2-immigration-first-100-days>.

¹⁷ Rangel Estrada, J.P. (2025). *El Darién no está cerrado: la realidad del retorno de migrantes*. [online] FIP. Available at: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/opinion/2025-03/el-darien-no-esta-cerrado-la-realidad-del-flujo-inverso-de-migrantes>.

¹⁸ Lee, E.S. (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, [online] 3(1), pp.47–57. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2060063?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

between origin and destination. The Darién Gap, as a crucial gateway to the global North, has been studied through this lens, examining migration not only between Colombia and Panama but also between the global South and North. This multi-layered approach helps explain the paradox of the Darién: its inherent dangers contrasted with migrants' determination to make the journey despite the risks.

For example, the 2024 IOM World Migration Report identifies criminal violence and political instability as key push factors behind irregular migration from South America to North America.¹⁹ The surge through the Darién Gap can be attributed to both political and economic crises in South American countries and the increasing restrictions on sea and air travel in Central America, making the Darién the only viable land route. The Darién is thus an “intervening obstacle”, the only path to North America despite the dangers, a reality that researchers and humanitarian actors highlight in addressing the lack of safe, legal migration routes.^{20 21}

Pull factors towards North America also play a significant role, including opportunities for safety from political instability and better economic prospects in the U.S. or Canada, while remittances sent back to families in origin countries are a key economic driver. For this reason, the necessity of tackling the root causes of migration is often emphasised.²² However, as this thesis explores, many push factors stem from global economic dynamics, shaped by development models adopted by the global South.²³ Migration is also a core mechanism of international development, particularly through remittances, (a record \$161 billion towards Latin America in 2024), thus attempts to halt migration risk exacerbating vulnerability and displacement.²⁴ In fact, early stages of economic development often increase emigration by expanding people's

¹⁹ IOM(2024). *World Migration Report 2024*. [online] Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>. Pg 91

²⁰ Lee, E.S. (1966)

²¹ Redacción Mundo (2022). *Corredores humanitarios, entre las propuestas para crisis migratoria en el Darién*. [online] Available at: <https://www.elspectador.com/mundo/america/corredores-humanitarios-entre-las-propuestas-para-crisis-migratoria-en-el-darién-noticias-hoy/> [Accessed 25 Apr. 2025].

²² European Parliament (2020). *Exploring migration causes: why people migrate | Topics | European Parliament*. [online] www.europarl.europa.eu. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200624STO81906/exploring-migration-causes-why-people-migrate>.

²³ Castles, S. (2013). The Forces Driving Global Migration. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 34(2), pp.122–140. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.781916>.

²⁴ Maldonado, R. and Harris, J. (2024). *Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2024: Diminishing Rates of Growth*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.18235/0013258>.

capacity to move.²⁵ Globally, remittances represent three times the value of official development assistance (ODA).²⁶

II. The criminal perspective and ambiguous boundaries between the legal and illegal dynamics behind migration

While remittances are one aspect of the political economy of migration, another line of enquiry is the study of how migration flows are shaped by illicit actors, who position themselves as facilitators of mobility for profit. Leon-Hernández develops the concept of the “migration industry” to discuss how on irregular migration routes, institutional presence is often poorly implanted, therefore various formal and informal actors capitalise on human mobility for their economic gain.²⁷ The Darién Gap is an interesting case study for considering this angle because as numerous researchers have shown, human mobility has transformed into a lucrative, semi-formal sector and actively reshapes economic relations in the region.²⁸

Criminal perspectives on the Darién have focussed on the central role of the *Clan del Golfo* (Gulf Clan; CDG) in this local economy. The CDG is the largest and most structured armed organisation in Colombia. Its emergence can be traced back to the demobilisation of the far-right paramilitary AUC group in 2006, which had participated in the Colombian conflict from 1997. Today the CDG operates as a paramilitary structure, as well as being the largest drug cartel in Colombia.²⁹ The CDG maintains its stronghold in the region Urabá Antioquia, the main departure point for migrants crossing the Darién.

Considering the criminal infrastructure underpinning migration through the Darién, organisations like International Crisis Group (ICG) have proposed enforcement-based responses to address the humanitarian crisis. In 2023, ICG recommended greater cooperation between police and military units in Colombia and Panama, including the

²⁵ Clemens, M.A. (2020). The Emigration Life Cycle: How Development Shapes Emigration from Poor Countries. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3679020>

²⁶ World Bank (2023). *World Development Indicators*. [online] The World Bank. Available at: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.

²⁷ Hernández-León, R. (2012). L'industrie de la migration. *Hommes & migrations*, 1296(2), pp.34–44. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.1508>.

²⁸ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022). *La frontera del Clan: migración irregular y crimen organizado en El Darién*. [online] FIP. Available at: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2022-12/lafrontera-del-clan-migracion-irregular-y-crimen-organizado-en-el-darien>.

²⁹ OBS (2018). *Colombia: No peace for human rights defenders, no peace without them*. [online] International Federation for Human Rights. Available at: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/colombia-no-peace-for-human-rights-defenders-no-peace-without-them>.

creation of a joint border force, a proposal echoed by members of the diplomatic community.³⁰ The report also calls for addressing the root causes of “humanitarian and security emergencies” in origin countries to reduce migration flows and, by extension, the CDG’s influence over them.³¹ However, enforcement alone has a limited impact, especially in areas like Urabá and the Darién Gap, where state presence and institutional capacity have long been perceived as weak.³²

Dismantling criminal networks like the CDG is a complex challenge, given their historical roots in armed conflict, institutional collaboration, and economic relations, seemingly oscillating between contestation of, and collusion with state actors. For these reasons, this thesis looks beyond the mere question of criminality, and at the deeper political and economic structures that shape migration through the Darién.

As underlined in the current literature, the humanitarian emergency in the Darién is well documented. Scholars have traced the rise in irregular migration through this region to structural factors operating across local, national, and international scales. While research has acknowledged the role of the CDG in managing the flow of migrants through the Darién as part of broader criminal operations, the analytical frameworks used to interpret this governance, particularly the notions of “ungoverned” or “empty” spaces, have important limitations. These frameworks, which define such spaces as “social, political, and economic arenas where states do not exercise effective sovereignty, or where state control is absent, weak, or contested,” risk constructing a theoretical black box.³³ That is, they obscure more than they reveal about how power and governance operate in migration zones like the Darién.

To better understand the characteristics of migratory governance on one of the world’s most dangerous migration routes, this thesis adopts a specific line of inquiry grounded in international political economy. This approach builds on two key observations. First, migration through the Darién involves a mosaic of state and nonstate actors, that operate in a political and economic nexus, in which the boundaries between legal and illegal economies are often unclear, as most licit sectors have parallel illicit

³⁰ International Crisis Group (2023). www.crisisgroup.org, pg 29

³¹ Ibid, pg 25

³² Angelucci, M. (2012). U.S. Border Enforcement and the Net Flow of Mexican Illegal Migration. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 60(2), pp.311–357. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1086/662575>.

³³ Clunan, A.L. and Trinkhaus, H.A. (2010). Conceptualizing Ungoverned Spaces Territorial Statehood, Contested Authority, and Softened Sovereignty. In: *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, pp.17–33. Pg17

operations.³⁴ Second, dominant narratives that cast such spaces as void of governance fail to account for how non-state actors like the CDG are not simply filling a vacuum, but are often embedded within broader systems of political and economic power.

In this light, recommendations to stop migration flows, through aid or enforcement are limited as they fail to grasp the complexity and embeddedness of migration within long-term socio-economic structures. Hein de Haas has emphasised that, given the deep developmental roots of migration, it is “useless to think that migration can be halted or that aid and trade are short-cut ‘solutions’ to immigration.”³⁵ The Colombian case underscores this point: the migratory phenomenon in the Darién cannot be understood or addressed solely through structural or criminal-based accounts. Instead, it demands closer analysis of the local political economy and the evolving relationships between the multiple actors involved in the process. This thesis aims to open the black box of migratory governance in the Darién by asking:

To what extent do the political and economic interactions between the Clan del Golfo and state actors constitute a form of alternative governance in the Darién region, and how does this configuration help explain its emergence as one of the most human rights-critical migration routes today?

Theoretical Framework

To provide an answer to these elements, this thesis mobilises a theoretical framework constructed on two central components: (i) The concept of “alternative governance” as a means of exploring beyond the black box of ungoverned space, and (ii) An understanding of the political and economic components of state functioning in developing countries. We formulate the hypothesis that the political and economic interactions between the CDG and state actors do not reflect a governance vacuum, but rather constitute a form of alternative governance in the Darién region. This configuration contributes to the reproduction of a migration corridor marked by violence and heightened human rights risks.

³⁴ Andreas, P., Jung, D., Kerry, J. and Naylor, T.R. (2004). Illicit International Political Economy: The Clandestine Side of Globalization. *Review of International Political Economy*, [online] 11(3), pp.641–652. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/4177514>.

³⁵ De Haas, H. (2005). International migration, Remittances and development: Myths and Facts. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(8), pp.1269–1284. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500336757>. Pg 1269

I. Grasping the Alternative Governance of Spaces through Human, Economic and Political flows

The concept of alternatively governed spaces emerged in an attempt to go beyond the shortcomings of-ungoverned spaces. Clunan and Trinkunas note that in reality, such areas are not ungoverned but alternatively governed, as lack of state authority or “soft sovereignty” gives way to alternative actors in co-existence and competition for governance.³⁶ The authors argue that traditional understandings of alternatively governed spaces have pointed to internal dynamics such as civil conflict, but that a more adapted definition in the context of modern globalisation may encompass areas vulnerable to the influence of transnational actors such as NGOs, international economic institutions, terrorist groups and international criminal organisations. In Colombia, the state’s limited control over certain areas including the Darién region has empowered both local governing actors (FARC, AUC, CDG), as well as international actors (namely multinational-firms, NGOs, U.S. foreign policy actors).

To conduct a case study on alternative governance, it is essential to adopt additional analytical tools that capture the spatial and relational dynamics at play. This thesis draws on Williams’ concepts of *spaces of flow* and *spaces of contestation* to analyse how alternative manifestations of migration governance have evolved in the Darién.³⁷ These ideas build on Williams’ framework for understanding alternatively governed and *dangerous spaces* in international security. Williams argues that the major security challenges of the 21st century are best understood through the lens of “gaps and spaces”, areas marked by the absence of full state authority across geographic, legal, social, and regulatory dimensions. These voids are often filled by non-state actors, including organized crime, who exploit the lack of governance and pose significant threats to human security. Within these *dangerous spaces*, Williams identifies *spaces of flow*, zones characterized by the movement of people, goods, and illicit substances, which defy state control and regulation. He also introduces *confrontational spaces*, most often borders, which symbolise the contested sovereignty of the nation-state. For actors such as smugglers, criminal networks, and migrants, crossing these spaces is not only a logistical challenge but also a strategic and economic opportunity. In the case of the Darién, both dynamics - unregulated flows and

³⁶ Clunan, A.L. and Trinkunas, H.A. (2010). Conceptualizing Ungoverned Spaces Territorial Statehood, Contested Authority, and Softened Sovereignty. In: *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, pp.17–33. Pg17

³⁷ Williams, P. (2010). Here Be Dragons, Dangerous Spaces and International Security. In: *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, pp.34–54.

contested borders, are central to understanding the interplay between the state and the fabrication of alternative governance.

This thesis employs these analytical tools to study the Darién Gap, as a historic space of flow, of contestation and of confrontation – which has had consequences on competing forms of governance, migration flows and human security. The notion of alternative or ungoverned spaces often stems from a comparison with the Western liberal state model based territorial control, rule of law, legitimacy, and provision of social policy.³⁸ In the case of the Darién Gap, these elements are notably absent: (i) The Colombian state has minimal physical presence or control over its borders; (ii) Widespread human rights violations occur with impunity; (iii) Local populations are effectively governed by armed groups that administer de facto justice and manage public infrastructure; and (iv) Limited economic opportunities drive youth participation in criminal economies. Framing governance as a normative ideal runs the risk of reducing areas like the Darién governance to mere “gaps” in state authority. Instead, this thesis seeks to understand how legitimacy is constructed through the interaction of multiple actors - state and non-state alike - as they manage, and shape migration flows through the Darién. These processes ultimately contribute to evolving power dynamics within an alternatively governed space.

II. Understanding alternative governance on the peripheries: the *embedded autonomy* of the Colombian state

This thesis thus adopts a neo-Weberian approach to state construction in *periphery countries* to explore the nature of the state in Colombia and its interactions between societal groups including armed actors, particularly in territories that are as economically marginalised as the Darién. The neo-Weberian angle allows this thesis to bridge the gap between literature related to *alternative governance* on a local level and political economy literature pertaining to the structural factors behind the Colombian state’s fragmented geographical presence. By applying this approach to the Darién Gap, this thesis offers a multi-level analysis of the management of the migratory phenomenon through the Darién: the national scale, the local scale, as well as the discursive sphere (how migration through the Darién is represented by the different actors involved in its unfolding).

³⁸ Zürn, M and Leibfried, S. (2005). Reconfiguring the National Constellation. In *Transformations of the State?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp2-7

Centre-periphery development theory is a foundational element of dependency theory, which posits that global economic development is structured around the flow of resources from peripheral to central nations. In this framework, the prosperity of wealthier states depends on the continuous supply of natural resources, inexpensive labour, and accessible markets from less developed countries. This dependency perpetuates underdevelopment in peripheral nations through economic, political, financial, and cultural mechanisms.

The origins of dependency theory can be traced back to the 1950 United Nations reports by Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch, culminating in the Prebisch-Singer thesis.^{39 40} Their thesis argues that over time, the prices of primary commodities decline relative to manufactured goods, leading to deteriorating terms of trade for countries reliant on raw material exports. Consequently, without industrialisation and economic diversification, these countries remain structurally disadvantaged in the global economy. Colombia has managed to diversify its domestic markets, but its exports remain dominated by primary goods, fuels and extractive industry products accounting for 56% of total shipments.⁴¹

Considering global dependency dynamics, Goodwin argues that the limited presence of the state in certain regions, where formal and informal economic actors dominate, is closely linked to the adoption of highly marketized economic models.⁴² He points in particular to neoliberal reforms and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in Latin America as key drivers of these dynamics. To explain why some states struggle to assert control across their territories, Goodwin adopts a political economy perspective, introducing the concept of “uneven decommodification geographies”. This framework blends centre-periphery theory with Polanyi’s concept of decommodification, which refers to the protection of land, labour, and money from being reduced solely to market commodities.⁴³ Polanyi warned that without such protections, unchecked market forces lead to deep social and environmental disruptions. Goodwin extends this argument, suggesting that colonial and capitalist development “restricted state and non-state forms of decommodification while simultaneously expanding market institutions and relations,

³⁹ Singer, H.W. (1950). The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries. *The American Economic Review*, [online] 40(2), pp.473–485. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1818065>.

⁴⁰ Prebisch, R. (1950). The economic development of Latin America and its principal problems. *repositorio.cepal.org*. [online] Available at: <https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/29973>.

⁴¹ OEC (2023). *Colombia Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners*. [online] [oec.world](https://oec.world/en/profile/country/col). Available at: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/col>.

⁴² Goodwin, G. (2024). Uneven decommodification geographies: Exploring variation across the centre and periphery. *Environment & planning. A (Print)*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518x231209766>.

⁴³ Polanyi, K. (1944). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*. New York: Rinehart.

leaving colonised peoples highly exposed to capitalist market forces.”⁴⁴ As a result, uneven state presence is understood not only as a legacy of conflict but also as a product of export-oriented economic models rooted in colonialism. This logic may also apply within states, at the inter-regional level.

This framework invites us to reposition the Darién region within Colombia’s broader political economy. While scholarship often frames the dominance of non-state actors in areas like the Darién in terms of conflict since WWII, a political economy lens allows for a deeper analysis of how these actors emerged from, and continue to operate within, specific economic structures and relations of power. This thesis explores how such dynamics shape governance and authority in the Darién today.

Centre–periphery development theory invites a rethinking of how we assess state capacity. In this regard, Evans argues that instead of debating the extent of state intervention, the focus should be on its forms and its effects. Framing the issue as a binary between interventionist and non-interventionist states obscures more important questions about the nature and outcomes of state involvement. In the contemporary global economy, the key concern is not how much the state intervenes, but what kind of intervention occurs and to what end.⁴⁵ It is in this context that the neo-Weberian framework allows this thesis to blend the notion of alternative governance on a local level with centre-periphery theory (as an analysis of the role of the Colombian state) to study the configuration of relations between state and non-state actors. This arrangement warrants an in-depth analysis because it is within this flux of negotiations between actors that the migratory phenomenon takes place.

Building on the work of dependency theory, Evans offers the notion of “dependent development”.⁴⁶ Evans examines the evolving relationships between multinational corporations, local private entrepreneurs, and state-owned enterprises. He contends that, despite ongoing contradictions among these three forms of capital, a triple alliance has emerged, forming the social and structural foundation for new patterns of industrialisation based on multi-lateral dependence. This claim lays the foundations for a concept later developed by Evans, that of *embedded autonomy*.⁴⁷ To illustrate this notion,

⁴⁴ Goodwin, G. (2024). Pg 7

⁴⁵ Evans, P.B. (1995). *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. [online] [www.jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t0sr). Princeton University Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t0sr>. pg 10

⁴⁶ Evans, P.B. (1979). *Dependent development : the alliance of multinational, state and local capital in Brazil*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

⁴⁷ Evans, P.B. (1995)

Evans distinguishes between three categories of state forms. He described them as *predatory*, *developmentalist* or *intermediate*.⁴⁸ Predatory states are those that hinder economic transformation through corruption, rent-seeking practices and a lack of autonomy to bring about redistributive reform. Developmentalist states on the other hand are not free from rent-seeking, however their collective efforts succeed in advancing, rather than obstructing, economic transformation. Intermediary states present characteristics of predatory and developmentalist states, differing across sectors. The analytical relevance of a continuum between predatory, intermediary and developmentalist forms of the state is recognition of the state's embedded autonomy, which refers to the state's capacity to foster development through interaction with private actors. It means that the state is autonomous but embedded in a network of relations with non-state actors, thus opening the way for characterising their relations and their outcome.

It is precisely this notion that will be applied to studying the actors involved in the migratory phenomenon in the Darién Gap. This thesis approaches the subject from an *alternative governance* angle to contest the notion of empty space, while simultaneously engaging in a political economy study to establish causality between state and non-state relations. Crucially, the notion of *embedded autonomy* offered by Evans allows this thesis to address the convergence of alternative governance and dependency theory by providing a framework to consider the Colombian state beyond representations of weakness or absence. Instead, it will engage with the interactions between actors in the Darién, whether cooperative or competitive, whether formal or informal.

Methodology

This thesis takes a qualitative approach and combines primary and secondary data through a strategy of triangulation, considering a range of sources including (i) (academic) literature on Colombian state formation, political economy, and armed groups to offer a structural backdrop for understanding governance in peripheral areas. (ii) Statistical and policy data from national (Colombia, Panama) and international organisations such as to contextualise the scale and nature of migratory flows. (iii) Semi-structured interviews with two field-researchers, and one former employee of Chiquita

⁴⁸ Evans, P.B. (1989). Predatory, Developmental, and Other Apparatuses: A Comparative Political Economy Perspective on the Third World State. *Sociological Forum*, [online] 4(4), pp.561–587. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/684425>.

Bananas (a key player in the development of relations between the state and the international private sector), to provide grounded insights into the practices and perceptions of governance actors on the ground (iv) Discourse analysis, applied to public statements, to examine how the governance of the migratory phenomenon is framed by different actors.

This thesis interprets these sources, through the frameworks of *embedded autonomy* and *alternative governance* to ascertain the factors behind the interlocking political and economic forces of the Darién, how this is reflected in the network of actors involved in the migratory process, and what this tells us about a wider state of alternative governance in the region.

The principal methodological constraint is the dominance of secondary data over first-hand field research, in a context where information about illicit activity is not easily found. Considering the short time frame, limited resources allocated and the general feasibility of a field investigation in the Darién, this thesis compensates for this by triangulating findings from a diverse range of sources to understand the alternative governance of migration on a macro level (Colombian state formation), a meso level (the local composition of actors), as well as studying the discourse of state and non-state actors involved in influencing these scales of analysis when understanding the migratory phenomenon in the Darién.

Interview Table

Date	Interviewee	Location	Organisation	Analysis
11/03/2025	Marilou Sarrut	Remote	Institut de recherche pour le développement	52min, AI transcription, analysis by key words and triangulation of information with secondary sources.
24/04/2025	Anonymous	Remote	Fundación Ideas para la Paz	53 min, AI transcription, analysis by key words and triangulation of information with secondary sources.
28/04/2025	Marilou Sarrut	Remote	Institut de recherche pour le développement	1h41, AI transcription, analysis by key words and triangulation of information with secondary sources.
06/05/2025	Anonymous	Remote	Chiquita Bananas (former employee)	46min, AI transcription, analysis by key words and triangulation of information with secondary sources.

Structure

This thesis is structured into three chapters. **Chapter 1** interrogates dominant portrayals of the Darién as an “ungoverned” or “empty” space by situating these framings within a broader historical context of colonial penetration and commercial exploitation. The chapter redefines the region as an *alternatively governed space*, shaped by long-standing dynamics of peripheral development. This framework allows for an analysis of the CDG as an actor embedded within historical paramilitary structures and illuminates how the Colombian state's *embedded autonomy* has facilitated the emergence of alternative governance arrangements. **Chapter 2** presents the core of our results on contemporary migration through the Darién, outlining key trends and analysing how the migratory journey itself has become a commodity. Here, migration is not simply a humanitarian or security issue, but a structured sector in which both formal and informal actors, enabled by a non-interventionist state, profit from the control of human mobility. This chapter explores how the resulting migration market constitutes a specific manifestation of a system of alternative governance. **Chapter 3** brings these threads together by examining how migration crystallises the broader dynamics of governance in the Darién. It argues that the migration economy reveals the persistence of an extractivist development model, sustained by a discursive interdependence between the CDG and the state. At the core of this entangled governance lies the lived experience of migrants, whose vulnerability is exacerbated when navigating through a region managed by overlapping local, national, and international legal regimes. We assert that migration not only reflects the structure of alternative governance in the Darién but also exposes its potentially dehumanising, extractive, and criminalising effects.

CHAPTER 1

The Darién: An Ungoverned Space?

This chapter challenges dominant narratives that depict the Darién Gap as an “empty,” “wild,” or “ungoverned” space, arguing instead that such framings are historically rooted in colonial practices of marginality and resource extraction. By situating the region within a *longue durée* perspective, it reveals how the Darién has long been subjected to external logics of commercial penetration and peripheral development. Rather than an absence of governance, what emerges is a history of alternative forms of control and spatial ordering, involving both competition and collaboration between state and non-state actors. This reorientation sets the stage for a deeper examination of the CDG, not as an anomalous actor, but as one embedded in a continuum of paramilitary control. Through this lens, the chapter also interrogates the Colombian state’s embedded autonomy and the ways in which it has historically enabled alternative governance arrangements that do not fit the model of a central nation state’s monopoly of the use of legitimate violence, thus blurring the lines between legality and illegality.

1. The roots of “ungovernability”

1.1 The Darién : A “Gap” between colonial, regional and nation-state ambitions... and their successes

Throughout history, the Darién has been the object of recurring and often contradictory projects aimed at both opening and closing it. Positioned as a “gap” between East and West as well as North and South, the region has repeatedly inspired unsuccessful initiatives to transform it into a global crossroads. The most recent example came in 2024, when Colombian President Gustavo Petro called for foreign investment to construct a trans-oceanic railway through the Darién. Yet the plan has thus far proven too financially and geographically challenging, and if ever realized, would only begin once Petro has left office.⁴⁹

Therefore, the idea of “closing” the Darién Gap carries two distinct, and in many ways opposing, meanings. On the one hand, it refers to closing the gap between

⁴⁹ Saavedra, F. (2025). *El tren interoceánico de Petro quedará en promesas debido a retrasos en los estudios*. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/01/18/el-tren-interoceanico-de-petro-queda-en-promesas-debido-a-retrasos-en-los-estudios/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

countries, continents, and hemispheres in line with globalisation's integrative ambitions. On the other, it means closing the region off entirely, in order to block the passage of disease, drugs, bandits, guerrillas, and migrants into North America. This counterintuitive duality, conceiving the Darién simultaneously as an empty void to be bridged and as a dangerous corridor of flows to be contained, underscores how external interests have shaped the region not only materially but also conceptually, contributing to the emergence of alternative forms of governance.

Both conceptions of the Darién have been constructed around tensions of emptiness and presence, resource-driven violence, geographical and human dangers, and state neglect. These discourses continue to coexist, often in contradictory ways, up to the present day. Migration through the Darién exemplifies this convergence: it unsettles portrayals of emptiness, highlights resource-based conflict among diverse actors, confronts migrants with extreme dangers, and is frequently attributed to the absence of the state. It is therefore crucial to trace the origins of the perceived ungovernability of the Darién, and the actors invested in sustaining or contesting it.

1.1.1 The Darién as a gateway between the East and the West

The Darién is a historic territory of transit. Before first European settlement in the Darién in 1500, the region that is now Urabá in Colombia and the Darién province of Panama was inhabited by the *Guna* people, who had arrived in South America centuries prior from central America.⁵⁰ While particular attention has been paid to recent migration patterns through the area, the Darién has long been a “space of flow”, in the sense of Williams as human movement is woven into the historical fabric of the Darién.

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In 1500 and 1501, Spanish explorers and colonisers Vasco Nuñez de Balbao and Alonso de Ojeda contacted the Gunas during their exploration of the Colombian coast and the Gulf of Urabá. In 1510, de Balbao was the first Spaniard to found a city on the American mainland, named *Santa María de la Antigua del Darién*, in the north of Chocó, Urabá. However, the city only existed for fourteen years before its destruction by the Spanish in 1524, due to resistance from Guna communities who ever since the arrival of

⁵⁰ Donner, N.R. (2024). *Beyond archaeology: why we need an interdisciplinary understanding of the Darién Gap*. [online] Leidenarchaeologyblog.nl. Available at: <https://www.leidenarchaeologyblog.nl/articles/beyond-archaeology-whywe-need-an-interdisciplinary-understanding-of-the-dari%C3%A9n-gap>.

⁵¹ Williams. P. (2010).

Europeans in the area had struggled for their land.⁵² Resistance also arose from African Maroons fleeing slavery in gold mines and pearl fisheries.

The second European attempt to control the Darién came in 1698, when Scotland under William Patterson (founder of the Bank of England) attempted to establish a colony between the slave-trading city of Cartagena, the strategic Caribbean harbour of Portobello and Panama's Pacific coast.⁵³ The motivations behind Scottish conquest had a moral underpinning in the colonial conquest for civilisation through religious imposition. However as shown by Lista, the prospect of colonising the Darién represented above-all a commercial opportunity. In Patterson's words, the Darién was the "door of the seas, and the key of the universe", a gateway to West-East commercial activity, based on free trade and a move away from the mercantilist practices of the English and Dutch trans-oceanic circuits of the time.⁵⁴ Politically, the Scottish attempt to transform the Darién into an economic gateway arose in a context of economic hardship in Scotland and a desire to prove the legitimacy of continued independence from the English crown.⁵⁶ Establishing a monopoly of goods transit between the Pacific and the Caribbean through the Darién seemed an efficient way to do so. In 1695, the *Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies*, also known as the *Darién Company*, was established. After only six months of its establishment, the trading company had received a £400,000 investment, representing approximately 25% of Scotland's entire economic worth.⁵⁷

In spite of its ambition and economic means, the Scottish conquest was a failure. After spending two months clearing the rainforest to establish *Fort St Andrew* and later *New Edinburgh*, the project soon proved untenable. Torrential rain in 1699, overcrowding and lack of freshwater led to ten deaths a day, including Patterson's own wife and child. Patterson had attempted from the beginning to bring the Guna people onside, but to little avail and after suffering a monthlong Spanish siege and naval blockade, Scottish

⁵² Cozzolino, M., Gentile, V., Mauriello, P. and Sarcina, A. (2024). Towards the Construction of a Hypothetical Map of Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darién (Colombia), The First Spanish City in the American Mainland. An Overview of Ten years of a Communitarian and Multidisciplinary Archaeological Project. *Computational Science and Its Applications – ICCSA 2024 Workshops*, pp.369–387. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-65332-2_24.

⁵³ Lista, G. (2020). 'No more occasion for Puffendorf nor Hugo Grotius': the Spanish rights of possession in America and the Darien venture (1698–1701). *History of European Ideas*, pp.1–18. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1815366>.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pg 3

⁵⁵ Paterson, W. (1700) *Letter to the Company of Scotland, 17 January 1700*. In: Dalrymple, J., *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. III. London, pp. 166.

⁵⁶ Daniel Crouch Rare Books (2025). *The Darién Scheme*. [online] Daniel Crouch Rare Books. Available at: https://crouchrarebooks.com/featured_items/the-darien-scheme/ [Accessed 29 Apr. 2025].

⁵⁷ Ibid

forces were forced to leave. Scotland found itself with £400,000 debt for a failed project that had caused hundreds of deaths. It was in offering to pay off this debt that Queen Anne of England managed to convince Scotland to sign the Act of Union in 1707, ending its independence.⁵⁸

1.1.2 The Darién as a ‘gap’ between the North and the South

The colonial project in the Darién envisaging a strategic East-West trading passage was never achieved. Instead, such an initiative was successfully completed further north, namely the Panama Canal, constructed between 1904 and 1914 by the United States.⁵⁹ From this point, we identify a shift in external commercial interest in the Darién. Instead of representing a potential trade bridge between the West and the East, the Darién became a ‘gap’ in North/South commercial relations. The Pan-American Highway Project (PAH) is a key testament to this.

Before the PAH, the First Pan-American Conference in 1889 had proposed a Pan-American railway, however its construction was never initiated, once work on the Panama Canal had begun.⁶⁰ In 1923, the Fifth International Conference of American States proposed the PAH, and the *Convention on the Pan-American Highway* was signed in 1936.⁶¹ ⁶² The highway was built in several stages and is today the world’s longest road at approximately 13,000 kilometres, connecting Prudhoe Bay in Alaska to Ushuaia in Argentina. As shown in **figure 1**, the only part of the PAH that was never completed is the 106 kilometre stretch between Turbo in Colombia and Yaviza in Panama, known as the Darién Gap. Since the 1970s, initiatives have been launched to foster complete commercial interconnectivity between South, Central and North America. However, just like European conquests failed to control the Darién for their West-East commercial objectives at the time, efforts from Colombia, Panama and the USA to bridge the gap have also only met downfall.

⁵⁸ Ibid

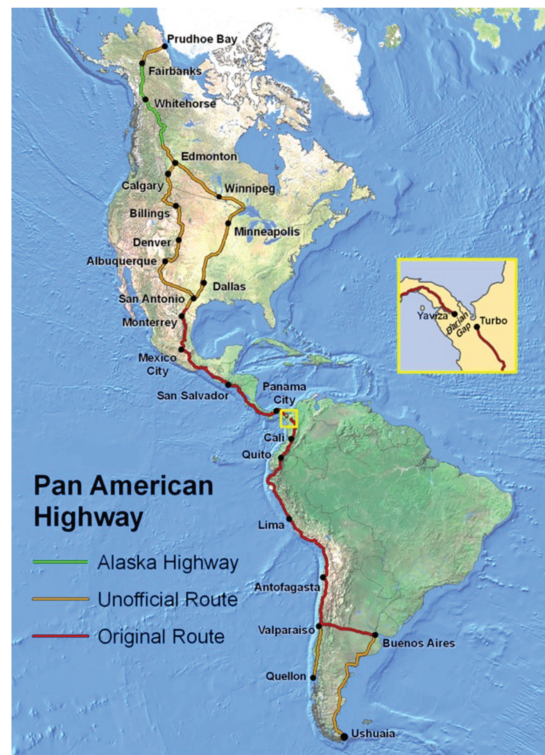
⁵⁹ Office of the Historian (n.d.). *Building the Panama Canal, 1903–1914*. [online] history.state.gov. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/panama-canal>.

⁶⁰ Caruso, J.A. (1951). The Pan American Railway. *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 31(4), p.608. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/2509357>.

⁶¹ Scott, J.B. (1923). The Fifth International Conference of American States. *The American Journal of International Law*, [online] 17(3), pp.518–521. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/2187904>.

⁶² No. 4354. *Convention on the Pan-American Highway, adopted by the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace. Signed at Buenos Aires, December 23rd, 1936*. United Nations Treaty Series. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.18356/813ef0c8-en-fr>.

Figure 1: The Pan American Highway



In 1971, the three countries agreed to complete the final link in the PAH. However, one of the key obstacles to the project was the presence of foot and mouth disease (FMD), which was found to be present on the Colombian side of the border, but not in Panama. For this reason, in a report to the U.S. congress in 1978, U.S. Controller General Elmer B. Staats advised against the continuation of the project:

“The Darién Gap Highway has stimulated concern over animal disease introduction and control. The “Gap” area has apparently served until now as an effective natural barrier to the spread of animal diseases, including FMD. Development and use of the Darién Gap Highway, however may increase the chances of FMD spreading northward into Central and North America”⁶³

The abandonment of the Darién Gap Highway reflects the paradox behind the conception of development of the Darién to connect North and South. While the initial plan was to link the Americas completely, the USA began to consider the Darién as a

⁶³ B. Staats, E. (1978). *Linking the Americas: Progress and Problems of the Darien Gap Highway*. [online] *Gao.gov*. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/products/psad-78-65>. Pg 9

barrier to unwanted resource flow. While for Staats, the Darién was a natural barrier for FMD, over the decades, the Darién became a space of flow for other unwanted goods including weapons, drugs and more recently migrants. This episode encapsulates the paradox that has long surrounded the Darién: it is imagined both as a bridge that might connect continents and hemispheres, and as a barrier that must be sealed against undesirable flows. Over time, the role once attributed to FMD has been extended to other perceived threats, from guerrillas and traffickers to narcotics and, most recently, migrants. Even the Spanish name *el Tapón del Darién* (“the stopper” or “plug”) reflects this logic of closure, standing in tension with the English term “gap.”⁶⁴

Such contradictory representations, simultaneously projecting emptiness to be traversed and danger to be contained, have persistently shaped external interventions in the Darién. They reveal how the region has been constructed as much through conceptual framings as through material projects, laying the groundwork for alternative forms of governance in a space marked by selective state presence.

1.2 The conceptual development of the Darién as an ungoverned space

One of the consequences of colonial and commercial exploit in the Darién is a contribution to its representation as an ungoverned space. This notion is above all an external label due to colonial and post-colonial failure to control an alternatively governed area. As shown by Runk, the development of representations of the Darién throughout history are tightly linked to external interests at the time.⁶⁵ Runk outlines five main stages of conceptualisation of the Darién throughout time: the *curious* Darién, the *violent and rich* Darién, the *dangerous* Darién, the *neglected* Darién and the *wild* Darién. These representations are interesting to study for two reasons. Firstly, each label is the product of a specific moment of external interest in the Darién’s history. Secondly, despite their historical roots, these labels crystallise several contemporary conceptual elements that are crucial to unpick to study alternative governance in the Darién today.

⁶⁴ Giro, P.O. (2002). The Darien Region Between Colombia and Panama: Gap or Seal? In: *Human Rights and the Environment: Conflicts and Norms in a Globalizing World*. London: Routledge, pp.172–197.

⁶⁵ Velásquez Runk, J. (2015) ‘Creating Wild Darién: Centuries of Darién’s Imaginative Geography and its Lasting Effects’, *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 14(3), pp. 127–156. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2015.0032>.

1.2.1 The curious Darién

The *curious* Darién represents the moment at which archaeologists began to study the region's prehistory and noted an absence of proof of human settlement. While accepted that the Darién was a land of indigenous migration, permanent presence was hard to ascertain resulting in a conundrum of whether archaeologists were observing “evidence of absence or absence of evidence”.^{66 67} Although this question is very old, interestingly it still underpins approaches that consider the Darién as an empty, ungoverned space. As will be developed, this thesis strives to demystify the Darién by studying this “absence” from a political economy lens to understand how embedded socio-economic relations in the Darién provide evidence for alternative governance, rather than empty space.

1.2.2 Violence and a source of colonial wealth

When European settlers first arrived in the Darién, the Darién was portrayed as *violent and rich*. The main source of wealth was gold, which spearheaded Spanish colonial conquest, leading to the killing of many Guna people for resource access. This period was also characterised by colonial competition for access to gold mines, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in collusion with local actors.⁶⁸ This relationship between violence, accumulation of wealth (as colonialist rent extraction) and later, capital accumulation in Urabá continues to underpin interactions between state and non-state actors today and shapes migration management. In a context where multiple actors have the capacity to act according to their interests, without a single overarching hegemony, we observe moments of violent conflict between actors, but also of cooperation. Understanding the interests of actors in the Darién allows us to examine territorial control for capital accumulation more clearly, which is crucial to understand migration in the area.

⁶⁶ Ibid pg 131

⁶⁷ Howe, B.R. (2001). *Secrets of the Rain Forest - Archaeology Magazine Archive*. [online] Archaeology.org. Available at: <https://archive.archaeology.org/0105/abstracts/rainforest.html>.

⁶⁸ Via, F.V. (2022). La extracción de oro en el Darién del siglo XVII. Origen y consolidación de un sistema minero de frontera (1637-1641 y 1679-1698). *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, [online] 49(2), pp.29–63. doi:<https://doi.org/10.15446/achsc.v49n2.93879>.

1.2.3 Danger in the Darién

The third representation is the *dangerous* Darién, referring to the 19th century, when international expeditions into the region with the aim of building a canal through the Darién were met with danger. Balf shows how in 1854 American and British expeditions arrived in Eastern Panama and entered the Darién, with ten Americans dying of starvation and three British explorers being killed by Guna people.⁶⁹ The *dangerous* Darién is a key element of migration through the area today and is repeatedly diffused by NGOs and journalists alike. For example, taking the titles of the recent Human Right Watch (HRW) publications on the issue:

“How the **Treacherous** Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas”⁷⁰
“Americas: Migrants Pushed to Cross Darién Gap, **Abused**”⁷¹ “This **Hell** Was My Only Option’:
Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap”⁷²

The recent migration situation in the Darién has strongly contributed to a resurgence of the representation of a *dangerous* Darién. While certainly true today, the concept of danger should be understood within a longer history of indigenous resistance to colonial exploitation in the area. This is crucial to understanding the framing of the humanitarian crisis today because most reports of violence in the Darién highlight the role of violent gangs in Panama, largely composed of younger members of indigenous communities.⁷³ Danger in the Darién remains closely associated with its “inherent” nature, whether that be environmental conditions or the presence of indigenous communities. This concentration of danger within the rainforest overshadows the dangers associated with the push factors for migration, or the dangers caused by an absence of safe and legal routes. The third representation of a dangerous Darién implies that death and injury are primarily the result of natural hazards and local violent regimes

⁶⁹ Balf, T. (2003). *The Darkest Jungle: The True Story of the Darien Expedition and America's Ill-Fated Race to Connect the Seas*. Crown.

⁷⁰ Pappier, J. (2023). *How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas* | *Human Rights Watch*. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/10/how-treacherous-dariengap-became-migration-crossroads-americas>.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch (2023). *Americas: Migrants Pushed to Cross Darién Gap, Abused* | *Human Rights Watch*. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/americas-migrants-pushed-crossdarien-gap-abused>.

⁷² Ragozzino, M.R. (2023). ‘This Hell Was My Only Option’. *Human Rights Watch*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/09/hell-was-my-only-option/abuses-against-migrants-and-asylumseekers-pushed-cross>.

⁷³ Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023) ‘Briser le mythe de la « jungle qui tue » : analyse du rôle des intermédiaires dans la traversée du Darién (frontière Colombie-Panama)’, *Revue*

without questioning why humans would put themselves in such positions of risk in the first place. In essence, the *dangerous* Darién reflects a reality, but the term bears analytical bias since it naturalises such danger and concentrates it within such a small territory, overshadowing the responsibility of the network of actors involved in international migratory movement.

1.2.4 A neglected Darién

The fourth representation, the *neglected* Darién is fundamental to understanding migration over the Colombian-Panamanian border today. This representation particularly emerged after the construction of the Panama Canal, which overhauled projects for the Darién to become the West-East connector. The neglected Darién was fundamentally a call for modernisation through infrastructure projects such as the PAH in light of its abandonment by colonial powers. When these initiatives also failed, the emphasis of neglect was transferred away from the international community and onto the Colombian and Panamanian states. This implied that the Darién was not only economically but also politically neglected, situated on the fringes of Colombian and Panamanian national sovereignty, with both sides of the border considered ungoverned and void of institutional presence.⁷⁴ This representation of the Darién is at the core of analyses of the humanitarian crisis. To take another example from HRW, their April 2024 report entitled, “**Neglected** in the Jungle Inadequate Protection and Assistance for Migrants and Asylum Seekers Crossing the Darién Gap” emphasises neglect from the Colombian and Panamanian states, leading to a void to be filled by the international humanitarian community.⁷⁵

The notion of a neglected Darién is also used to study the extreme levels of violence on the Panamanian side of the border that occur in a context of near-total impunity, where state neglect results in the effective absence of legal protections. This situation can be seen as an unintended example of Agamben’s concept of the *state of exception*: although the Darién province officially falls under Panamanian jurisdiction, the rule of law is effectively suspended.⁷⁶ Migrants crossing the Darién find themselves in

⁷⁴ Colombia declared independence in 1810 and later formed Gran Colombia (1819–1831), which included the Darién; the First Pan-American Conference was held in 1889; Panama separated from Colombia in 1903, creating the current border through the Darién; and the Pan-American Highway was launched in 1923, though the Darién Gap remains unconnected.

⁷⁵ Ragozzino, M.R. (2024). Neglected in the Jungle. *Human Rights Watch*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/04/03/neglected-jungle/inadequate-protection-and-assistance-migrants-and-asylum-seekers>.

⁷⁶ Agamben, G. (2005). *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

what Agamben terms *bare life*, excluded from legal protection, reliant on smugglers and sheer luck for survival, and exposed to violence without recourse to justice.⁷⁷ Institutional abandonment thus strips individuals of their rights, reducing them to mere existence outside the political and legal order.

A key aim of this thesis, however, is to challenge and engage with the notion of neglect in the Darién. Rather than being empty, the Darién is governed through a nexus of relations between state and non-state actors. Their simultaneous presence is not accidental. It is the result of post-colonial development models that have consistently empowered alternative actors. These actors, whether formal or informal, have exercised a certain degree of autonomy in the region of Urabá and the Darién. It is within this context that this thesis analyses migration over the border.

1.2.5 A wild Darién

The final representation offered by Runk is the *wild* Darién. The wild Darién emerged at the end of the 20th century, to emphasise an opposition between a “jungle” and significant economic activity. Urabá from the 1970s became a major banana-producing zone, and neoliberal structural reforms attracted increased attention from the private sector.⁷⁸ During the Colombian conflict in the second half of the twentieth century, the Darién was considered a haven for guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug traffickers. The *wild* Darién thus reflects the perception of transnational firms seeking to expand their operations within this context. A key effort to tame the wilderness of the Darién was when the USA contributed \$6.5 million dollars and wrote off a part of Panama’s debt to the reinforcement of the Darien National Park in 2003.⁷⁹ The term “Darién Jungle” which is often used in the media is also linked to the notion of an untameable wilderness.⁸⁰ However, as critics such as Valverde have shown, the origin of the word “jungle” is rooted in a colonial desire to control “uncontrollable” spaces such as the Darién, with little link to geographical or biological conditions (compared to

⁷⁷ Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁷⁸ Hough, P.A. (2022). Despotism and Crisis in the Banana Regime of Urabá. *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, [online] pp.125–208. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009036757.006>.

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury (2004). *Press Release Debt For Nature Agreement To Conserve Panama’s Forests*. [online] U.S. Department of the Treasury. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/js1865>.

⁸⁰ Pascual, J. (2024). *Au Panama, le cauchemar de la jungle du Darien sur la route du rêve américain*. [online] Le Monde.fr. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/04/28/au-panama-l-enfer-de-la-jungle-dudarien-sur-la-route-du-reve-americain_6230336_3210.html [Accessed 29 Apr. 2025].

“rainforest” for example).⁸¹ The use of “jungle” has also been repeatedly displaced in public discourse for example when used to attach negative labels to informal migrant camps in Calais, France.⁸²

Although the impact of economic development in Urabá in the Darién will be further discussed, it is important to highlight how perceptions of an untameable wilderness did not necessarily deter the private sector from engaging in profit-making activity. On the contrary, multinationals somewhat integrated this wilderness, using it for their own interests, navigating an ecosystem of public, private, military, guerrilla, criminal and civil society actors.

This conceptual development (*curious, violent, rich, dangerous, neglected, wild*) highlights how representations of the Darién have portrayed the area as an ungoverned space. It is precisely these representations that compose understandings of the Darién as an area with a lack of state capacity or will to govern the zone. However as argued by Clunan in her conceptualisation of alternative governance, “ungoverned” spaces such as the Darién “emerge precisely because of states’ deliberate policy choices or with the willing collaboration of state authorities, usually in combination with the forces of globalisation and local socioeconomic dynamics.”⁸³ Therefore, the state-centric notion of an “ungoverned” space is largely reductive of the alternative forms of governance at play, in the case of the Darién between criminal actors, paramilitary groups, international bodies as well as the Colombian state. Approaching the question of migration by considering the Darién as empty or “ungoverned” does very little to uncover which actors are involved and which socio-economic dynamics have favoured this situation. Hence the starting point for understanding the Darién, as this section has shown, is to understand its history, how its labels have been constructed by external discourse and how these labels may portray the Darién as wild, empty and ungoverned, distracting from alternative forms of governance at play.

⁸¹ Valverde, M. (1996). The Dialectic of the Familiar and the Unfamiliar: ‘The Jungle’ in Early Slum Travel Writing. *Sociology*, 30(3), pp.493–509. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038596030003005>.

⁸² Molinie, W. (2016). *Calais : parler de ‘jungle’, est-ce raciste ?* [online] TF1 INFO. Available at: <https://www.tf1info.fr/societe/calais-parler-de-jungle-est-ce-raciste-1504542.html> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2025].

⁸³ Clunan, A.L. (2010). Pg 4

2. Embedded autonomy of the Colombian state and the shaping of alternative governance on the peripheries

To understand the emergence of alternative governance in Urabá and the Darién, the role of economic development is essential. This section studies economic development in the Darién from the latter half of the twentieth century until 2025 from the angle of centre-periphery theory, before considering the convergence of state and non-state of actors involved in this development through the lens of Evans' notion of *embedded autonomy*. This angle allows us to understand the emergence of alternative forms of governance in the Darién.

2.1 Colombia on the periphery of the global economy

2.1.1 The emergence of an export-based economy

Within the international division of labour from a structuralist perspective, Colombia as a “peripheral country” has historically specialised in exporting primary goods, whereas “centre countries” export industrial goods.⁸⁴ This has contributed to the deterioration of terms of trade, meaning that raw materials face a long-term decline in the prices of their exports relative to the prices of manufactured goods. This is due to on the one hand, the low-income elasticity of demand for raw materials, meaning that consumers are prepared to increase their spending by more for manufactured goods from centre countries than for raw materials from periphery countries. This is influenced by technological progress in industrialised countries which seek to produce more by using less raw goods, thus creating a surplus in raw materials and reducing their market value. The deterioration of terms of trade for peripheral countries is also the result of labour market asymmetries. This means that in industrialised countries, when productivity increases, the benefits go to both businesses and workers in the form of higher profits and wages. In primary exporting countries, productivity gains (e.g. mechanized agriculture) usually lead to lower prices and therefore lower wages instead.⁸⁵

Pérez-Rincón shows how these dynamics played out in the latter portion of the 20th century. In the past, trade played a minor role in Colombia's economy, with exports accounting for just 4.2% of gross national product (GNP) in 1913 (lower than in most

⁸⁴ Pérez-Rincón, M.A. (2006). Colombian international trade from a physical perspective: Towards an ecological 'Prebisch thesis'. *Ecological Economics*, 59(4), pp.519–529. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2005.11.013>.

⁸⁵ Ibid pg 520

other major Latin American countries). By the late 20th century, however, Colombia had shifted away from economic isolation, with exports rising to 12% of GNP.⁸⁶ Over the course of the century, the value of Colombian exports increased dramatically, by 985 times in constant 1990 U.S. dollars, going from \$11.8 million in 1905 to \$11.664 billion in 1999. This growth included periods of rapid acceleration tied to improved terms of trade, especially in coffee exports, as well as declines during trade downturns. Colombia's most significant export boom came with the adoption of an outward-oriented development model in the late 1960s and rising global demand for raw materials. Figures from 2023 show that exports of goods and services current represent 17.8% of GDP, and this peaked in 2022 at 20.2%.⁸⁷

2.1.2 The neoliberal turn in Colombia from 1990 onwards

Goodwin also takes inspiration from Prebisch's thesis to argue that peripheral countries are more exposed to market forces due to "fictitious commodification". He outlines three impacts of this dynamic including perverse land and labour use configurations, the weakening of trade unions and "more challenging conditions for states to manage capitalism".⁸⁸ This means that in peripheral countries, decommodification and state intervention are particularly challenging due to market force exposure, dominated by centre-based actors, being at the heart of peripheral development models. This process is also highlighted by Furtado, in the sense that U.S.-dominated multinational corporations extended their influence over export markets in Latin America from the 1960s onwards, while also being able to influence laws and regulations, all the while with most profits sent in the direction of the USA as a capitalist centre for manufacturing.⁸⁹

In the case of Colombia, two main waves of neoliberal privatisation can be distinguished, from 1990 and from 1999. Following the Second World War, successive governments had favoured the protection of national markets to foster industrialisation and avoid over-exporting to richer nations. However, the reforms introduced by César

⁸⁶ Pontón, A., Posada, C.E., Reyes, C. and Urrutia, M. (2002). *El crecimiento económico colombiano en el siglo XX: aspectos globales*. Grupo de estudios del crecimiento económico colombiano (GRECO).

⁸⁷ World Bank (2025). *World Bank Open Data*. [online] World Bank Open Data. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicador/NE.EXP.GNFS.ZS?locations=CO> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

⁸⁸ Goodwin, G. (2024). Pg 8

⁸⁹ Furtado, C. (1973/2021). Underdevelopment and Dependence: The Fundamental Connections. *Review of Political Economy*, 33(1), pp.7–15. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259.2020.1827549>.

Gaviria Trujillo's government from 1990 until 1994 dramatically overhauled the country's macroeconomic configuration. This period is known as the *Apertura Económica* (economic opening) and refers to when Colombia adopted a series of structural reforms seeking to liberalise the economy.⁹⁰ This period can also be analysed from the angle of Goodwin and Polanyi's interpretation of commodification as it introduced a large range of privatisation measures. For example, laws adopted in 1990 and 2002, which sought to liberalise the labour regime by lowering labour costs, and a law in 1993 privatising aspects of the social security system.⁹¹ The economic opening invited an influx of foreign capital into Colombia but also had negative side-effects. Currency appreciation and high interest rates hurt local industry and agriculture, causing deindustrialisation and deagrarianisation. Instead of fostering broad development, investment was concentrated in extractive sectors with low job creation.⁹²

In 1999, Colombia fell into recession - the economy shrinking by 4.2%.⁹³ In the same year Colombia signed a structural adjustment agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which provided a \$2.7 billion loan in exchange for Colombia's commitment to privatising a wide range of industries and public services, phasing out subsidies, raising public service tariffs, tightening monetary policy through higher interest rates, reducing the size of the public sector, and further liberalising its economy to compete in global markets.⁹⁴ ⁹⁵ However, successive periods of liberalisation of the Colombian economy had serious social consequences, especially due to land-grabbing.⁹⁶ The fiscal and political incentives introduced to attract foreign capital in many cases lead to mass land dispossession and large-scale displacement. Therefore, economic reforms added fuel to the Colombian internal conflict.

In Mason's analysis of alternative forms of authority in global peripheries, she argues that globalisation "increasingly facilitates the formation of alternative socio-political

⁹⁰ Enrique, C. (2015). La apertura económica en Colombia. *Upb.edu.co*. [online] doi:<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11912/7755>.

⁹¹ Bernal, M. and Ortiz, I. (2022). Some Structural Elements for Understanding the Social Uprising in Colombia. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, [online] 121(2), pp.409–416. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9663702>.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ IMF (n.d.). *Colombia and the IMF*. [online] IMF. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/COL#countrydata>.

⁹⁴ Avirgan, T. (2002). *World Bank/IMF Threw Colombia Into Tailspin*. [online] Economic Policy Institute. Available at: https://www.epi.org/publication/webfeatures_viewpoints_colombia/.

⁹⁵ Government of Colombia (1999). *Colombia Letter of Intent, December 3, 1999*. [online] Imf.org. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/1999/120399.htm>.

⁹⁶ Hurtado-Hurtado, C., Dionisio Ortiz-Miranda and Eladio Arnalte-Alegre (2024). Disentangling the paths of land grabbing in Colombia: The role of the state and legal mechanisms. *Land Use Policy*, 137, pp.106998–106998. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2023.106998>.

orders”.⁹⁷ In the case of Colombia, economic liberalisation involved not only the withdrawal of the state from infrastructure, social services and a shrinking of its fiscal base, but also a reconfiguration of social, political and economic dynamics on a local level in response to the changes brought by foreign capital. Therefore, it is necessary to look beyond binary understandings of centre-periphery dynamics. This thesis studies the networks of interdependency between economic actors in the Darién, whose positions have been carved by peripheral development models.

2.1.3 A development model to be grasped through the *embedded autonomy* of the state

From a neo-Weberian standpoint, the Colombian development model can be aligned with Evans’ notion of *dependent development*.⁹⁸ Colombian economic growth from the 1990s was facilitated by an influx of investment from multinational companies in raw material extraction. The adoption of structural reforms favoured a less redistributive state, at the expense of consistently high levels of inequality. As of 2025, Colombia is ranked as the third most unequal country in the world with a Gini Coefficient of 54.8% according to the World Bank.⁹⁹ These factors are identified by Evans as archetypal characteristics of dependent development, in which the state fosters the empowerment of private sector actors, and dependency becomes a factor rather than a barrier for national economic development.¹⁰⁰ For Evans, *embedded autonomy* involves the participation of a nexus of private and public actors in such economic development.¹⁰¹ Concretely, the state is autonomous in its capacity to bring about development, but remains deeply embedded in relations with the private actors involved.

When applied to the case of Colombia, the private sphere is difficult to define and is comprised of a multitude of local, national and international, but also informal actors operating at regional, national or transnational scales. The informal sector accounts for \$296 billion or 29.6% of Colombia’s GDP.¹⁰² Furthermore, collaboration between the state, businesses and armed groups blurs the boundaries between the public

⁹⁷ Mason, A.C. (2005). Constructing Authority Alternatives on the Periphery: Vignettes from Colombia. *International Political Science Review*, [online] 26(1), pp.37–54. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/1601649>. Pg 38

⁹⁸ Evans, P.B. (1979).

⁹⁹ World Population Review (2025). *Gini Coefficient by Country 2025*. [online] World Population Review. Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country>.

¹⁰⁰ Evans, P.B. (1995) pg 11

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² World Economics (2024). *Colombia’s Informal Economy Size | Shadow Economy | 2024 | Economic Data | World Economics*. [online] World Economics. Available at: <https://www.worldeconomics.com/InformalEconomy/Colombia.aspx>.

and private spheres. While such dynamics may portray Colombia as a predatory state (in the sense of Evans), the relations of cooperation between the state, private actors and armed groups through the lens of embedded autonomy indicate an intentional development model based on the private sector, whether formal or not.¹⁰³ Mason summarises this argument, proposing that, “While alternative socio-political orders can undermine what are often already precarious structures of domestic governance and authority, new spheres of authority are not always regressive. They may in fact enhance state performance”¹⁰⁴ In other words, the proliferation of hybrid arrangements in Colombia, though seemingly corrosive of state sovereignty, can also function as adaptive mechanisms that bolster governance capacity in peripheral regions, allowing the state to extend its influence indirectly through networks of private and informal authority.

2.2 The Darién in the Urabá region: An internal periphery

The centre-periphery framework can be employed not only to study the place of Colombia in the global system, but also the economic dynamics of its most marginalised regions such as Urabá. **Figure 2** (next page) shows how the region of Urabá straddles two administrative departments: Chocó, (home to the Darién) in the West, and Antioquia (home to the key transit town of Necoclí) in the East.

¹⁰³ Evans, P.B. (1989). Predatory, Developmental, and Other Apparatuses: A Comparative Political Economy Perspective on the Third World State. *Sociological Forum*, [online] 4(4), pp.561–587. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/684425>.

¹⁰⁴ Mason, A.C. (2005). Pg 39

Figure 2: Map of the region of Urabá



Source: *Narco-frontiers: A spatial framework for drug-fuelled*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Mapof-Uraba-showing-its-municipalities-main-highway-and-major-rivers-Source-Author_fig1_328833566

While economic development varies between and within the two departments, Urabá can be considered as an *internal periphery*. The notion of an internal periphery is an offshoot of traditional centre-periphery theory and considers that the economic composition of states varies strongly at a regional level.¹⁰⁵ As discussed by Kaps and Komlosy, the *internal periphery* concept permits the analysis of intra-state spatial disparities, proposes an analysis of regional dynamics beyond state borders, and:

“facilitates the consideration of political, social, and cultural factors, for example the role played by institutions, elites, and social movements in the design of regional development policies; the impact of religion and mentality on identity formation; the links between social strata, culture, and ethnicity; and the relationship between politics and business, among other issues”¹⁰⁶

These elements are key to understanding the Darién which is one of the poorest parts of Colombia, possesses a geographic, historical and social identity that extends

¹⁰⁵ Kaps, K. and Komlosy, A. (2013). Centers and Peripheries Revisited. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, [online] 36(34), pp.237–264. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/90000017>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pg 253

beyond Colombia (comprising Chocó, Colombia and the Darién Province, Panama), and is underpinned by constantly moving relations between state, non-state, armed and indigenous groups which shape regional economic dynamics.

2.2.1 Extractivism and inequality in Urabá

In Urabá, economic development initiatives have most recently come under the form of megaprojects, including mines, industrial facilities, tourist infrastructure and regional infrastructure projects.¹⁰⁷ Chocó (the Darién) is Colombia's poorest department, with almost 80% of its population living under the poverty line.¹⁰⁸ Despite this, Chocó is a department renowned for its abundant gold and platinum reserves and is home to the largest alluvial platinum extraction in Latin America, especially in the Unguía and Cacarica River area. Mining in the area is primarily conducted through informal, artisanal, and small-scale operations, which are closely interwoven into the region's economy and cultural practices.¹⁰⁹ Urabá is also a major agricultural hub, especially for the production of bananas and plantains. About 40% of Colombia's exports of bananas and plantains come from this region, making it a vital component of the nation's agriculture industry.¹¹⁰ Colombia's largest banana cultivation area at 35,123 hectares is situated in Urabá, stretching over Chocó and Antioquia.¹¹¹

A third key economic asset in Urabá is its maritime access, and its recent port construction projects. Located close to Turbo in Antioquia on the southeast side of the Gulf of Urabá, Puerto Antioquia is a significant multipurpose port that is currently being built. Due to open in the 2025, it is built to handle a variety of cargo, including

¹⁰⁷ Ali, M. (2017). The Darién Gap: Political Discourse and Economic Development in Colombia. In: A.F. Castro, A. Herrero-Olaizola, and C. Rutter-Jensen, eds., *Territories of Conflict Traversing Colombia through Cultural Studies*. [online] Boydell & Brewer, pp.112–120. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/territories-ofconflict/darien-gap-political-discourse-and-economic-development-incolombia/3B7DFEAD80E2452858B3E5812C5E69B8>.

¹⁰⁸ Gupta, H. (2024). *Poverty in Colombia's Chocó Region - The Borgen Project*. [online] The Borgen Project. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-in-colombias-choco-region/>.

¹⁰⁹ Lara-Rodríguez, J.S. (2020). How institutions foster the informal side of the economy: Gold and platinum mining in Chocó, Colombia. *Resources Policy*, p.101582. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2020.101582>.

¹¹⁰ Loren Moss and Trejo, D. (2020). *Antioquia Colombia's Secretary of Economic Development Talks Regional Growth & Foreign Investment With Me - Loren Moss*. [online] Lorenmoss.com. Available at: <https://lorenmoss.com/antioquiacolombias-secretary-of-economic-development-talks-regional-growth-foreign-investment-with-me/>.

¹¹¹ Dawson, C. and Loecillit, D. (2019). *Producer country file: The banana in Colombia*. [online] CIRAD Agricultural research for development. Available at: <https://www.fruitrop.com/en/Articles-by-subject/Full-countryprofile/2019/The-banana-in-Colombia>.

automobiles, general products, dry and refrigerated containers, and bulk commodities.¹¹² The port was described to us as not only a development project but a “space for dialogue between illegal armed actors and the territorial management and governance that takes place in the Darién.”¹¹³ Puerto Antioquia is in this sense a site where the interests of the state, private capital, and armed groups intersect. Far from representing the absence of the state, such projects illustrate how governance in Colombia often emerges through hybrid arrangements, an embodiment of embedded autonomy in which public authority is exercised in cooperation with, and sometimes dependence upon, private and informal actors.

2.2.2 Resource outflows and the facilitation of alternative actors in Urabá

A key question that considerations of Urabá as an internal periphery allows us to address is why, despite its natural resources and infrastructure projects, is Urabá one of the most marginalised and poor regions in all of Colombia? This may be explained by the fact that in recent years, projects have been supported by initiatives such as 2004 *Plan Estratégico Urabá-Darién* (Urabá-Darién Strategic Plan; PEUD).¹¹⁴ According to Ballvé, following an interview with the regional manager of the PEUD at the time, the aim of the plan was to “finally bring the presence of the state to Urabá once and for all.”¹¹⁵ The PEUD provided microcredit loans to rural families as well as large infrastructure projects through public-private partnerships totalling hundreds of millions of dollars. However, most of the revenue was directed towards the development of the poorer areas of the city of Medellín, in the south of Antioquia.¹¹⁶ The “Medellín Miracle”, a period of rapid urban development was based upon extraction and revenue flow from the peripheral Darién region, whose local populations saw very little economic benefit, towards the core urban centre.¹¹⁷

When read through the framework of *uneven decommodification geographies* proposed by Goodwin, Urabá’s extraction and export-based economy is a factor for explaining the

¹¹² Ramírez, S. (2024). *New Port of Antioquia in Colombia will boost fruit exports starting 2025*. [online] FreshFruitPortal.com. Available at: <https://www.freshfruitportal.com/news/2024/11/18/new-port-of-antioquiain-colombia-will-boost-fruit-exports-starting-2025/>.

¹¹³ Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 24 April. My translation. cf appendix 3

¹¹⁴ Ballvé, T. (2020). Urabá: A Sea of Opportunities? In: *The Frontier Effect*. [online] Cornell University Press, pp.149–170. doi:<https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501747533.003.0008>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, pg 149

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pg 150

¹¹⁷ Rapid Transition Alliance (2018). *The Medellín miracle*. [online] rapidtransition.org. Available at: <https://rapidtransition.org/stories/the-medellin-miracle/>.

nature of the Colombian state's role in the region. The structural reforms adopted from the 1990s favoured extractive industries controlled by international and non-state actors as a model for economic growth. For this reason, the Colombian state did not pursue a programme of redistributive or welfare-based reforms in Urabá. The role of the state, as imposed by international financial institutions was that of a facilitator of privatisation, especially in peripheral regions such as the Urabá, rich in resources, but difficult to govern without collaboration with alternative actors. It is within this context that Ballvé identifies a “frontier effect” in the region of Urabá, referring to a patchwork of actors competing to fill the governance vacuum.¹¹⁸

This can be exemplified through the mining industry in Chocó, which is a highly informal sector. Illegal mining covers 27,500 hectares of Chocó's territory, representing almost half of illegal mining in all of Colombia. In absence of permits, mining companies often declare their profits and therefore pay taxes in other areas, meaning that very little mining revenue returns to the local area. It was estimated by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (ORCCRP) in 2021 that mining companies gave 8% of revenues to armed groups, 12% to landowners, 10% to the local community council and more to corrupt local authorities in exchange for warning of imminent raids.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, despite a local economy featuring a multitude of state, non-state, informal and criminal actors, the state cannot be considered completely absent in Urabá. Ballvé in a later article argues that:

“Urabá's narco-driven economies of violence are not somehow anathema to projects of modern liberal statehood - usually associated with tropes of ‘institution building’ and ‘good governance’ - but deeply tied to initiatives aimed at making spaces governable, expanding global trade, and attracting capital.”¹²⁰

This claim is at the basis of this thesis' argument regarding the necessity to consider the composition of actors in the Darién through the lens of embedded autonomy, in which the state has an active role in the management of relations between alternative actors within broader political and economic objectives. As shown later, this

¹¹⁸ Ballvé, T. (2020). *The Frontier Effect*. Cornell University Press.

¹¹⁹ OCCRP (2021). *How Illegal Mining Fuels Pollution and Corruption in Colombia's Northwest*. [online] OCCRP. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigation/how-illegal-mining-fuels-pollution-and-corruption-in-colombiasnorthwest>.

¹²⁰ Ballvé, T. (2012). Everyday State Formation: Territory, Decentralization, and the Narco Landgrab in Colombia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30(4), pp.603–622. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1068/d4611>. Pg 1

dynamic is crucial for understanding how migration has become a political and economic resource for actors in the Darién. The final section of this chapter will use this lens of embedded autonomy to explain the paramilitary phenomenon in the Darién, and thus the central position of the CDG in Urabá and the Darién's economic relations today.

3. The evolution of armed actors in the Darién

In order to understand the CDG's role in the Darién, we must first outline how it emerged in a region where armed alternative governance was rife for decades, and in which paramilitary structures became embedded in relations between the state, the private sector and insurgent groups. This thesis does not aim to recount the full history of the Colombian conflict; however, it is important to underscore how, over time, ideological motivations were increasingly eclipsed by the economic interests of the various actors involved, particularly in regions such as Urabá.

3.1 The role of the Colombian Conflict between 1964 and 2017

3.1.1 The Darién as a strategic space of flow

The period of *la Violencia*, often considered a prequel to the Colombian Conflict, brought devastation to the country. Between 1946 and 1966, 200,000 people are estimated to have died, and 2 million people were forcibly displaced.¹²¹ *La Violencia* mainly implicated warring liberal and conservative elites and is important to understanding the Colombian conflict because the end of *la Violencia* involved the political exclusion of already marginalised groups.¹²² It was in a context of bloodshed and exclusion that the Colombian Conflict began in 1964 with the creation of the FARC and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army; ELN), who sought to overthrow the government and implement socialist reforms. While the Colombian Conflict was (and still is) an ideologically based dispute, land and resources have been at the core of intensification.¹²³

¹²¹ Roldán, M. (2002). *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946-1953*. [online] Duke University Press. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jnr4>.

¹²² Justice for Colombia (2022). *Colombian Armed Conflict*. [online] justice for colombia. Available at: <https://justiceforcolombia.org/about-colombia/colombian-armed-conflict/>.

¹²³ Ibid

Several factors can be distinguished to explain this intensification, attracting armed groups to the region of Urabá. Firstly, the region was home to a very poor peasantry due to the conditions imposed by the landowners and banana plantations. Secondly the *Partido Comunista de Colombia* (Colombian Communist Party; PCC) was already well established in the region, which allowed the FARC, as its armed wing, to emerge rapidly. Thirdly, the Colombian army had comparatively little presence in Urabá compared to other regions. Fourthly, smuggling routes were already well-established in the area. Finally, the geographical terrain characterised by mountain and rainforest favoured guerrilla-style combat.¹²⁴

As shown by Cajiao, Tobo and Restrepo, Urabá and the Darién have hosted some of the most important armed groups involved in the Colombian conflict over the past 40 to 50 years.¹²⁵ The *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (Popular Liberation Army; EPL), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group mainly active from 1967 until 1991 was mainly based in Urabá.¹²⁶ The FARC (founded in 1966, established its 5th Front in Urabá in 1971. Following the split of the FARC's 5th Front in the 1990s, the 57th Front was created along the Colombian-Panamanian border in the Darién.¹²⁷ The proximity with Panama provided a safe haven for fighters hiding from Colombian security forces. The 57th Front soon became one of the richest blocs of the FARC, using the Darién as a cover to smuggle drugs out of Colombia and to smuggle weapons into Colombia. A 2003 study revealed that Panama was the single largest transshipment point for illegal weapons into Colombia.¹²⁸ The FARC's preferred smuggling routes included both illicit corridors through the Darién rainforest as well as maritime routes through the Gulf of Urabá.¹²⁹ The FARC's principal opponents, the paramilitary AUC, formed in 1997 also used routes through the Darién for arms importation. This became a key element of conflict in the Darién as both groups competed for territorial control of strategic trafficking routes. García argues that Urabá is a “region of borders” due to a constant competition between

¹²⁴ Ballvé, T. (2020). *The Frontier Effect*. Cornell University Press. Pg 38

¹²⁵ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022).

¹²⁶ Martin, G. (1997). Violences stratégiques et violences désorganisées dans la région de Urabá en Colombie. *Cultures & conflits*, (24-25). doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/conflits.2166>.

¹²⁷ Alsema, A. (2013). *Ivan Rios Bloc: the FARC's Most Vulnerable Fighting Division*. [online] InSight Crime. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/farc-vulnerability-ivan-rios/>.

¹²⁸ Cragin, K. and Hoffman, B. (2003). *Arms Trafficking and Colombia*. [online] *Rand.org*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1468.html.

¹²⁹ Ibid

actors for exploitable land and territorial control.¹³⁰ Whether legal or illegal, actors have historically engaged in this struggle for financial and political motives.¹³¹ In this sense the Darién as a *space of flow* has historically cemented its nature as a *confrontational space*, with controlling the flow of resources at the heart of competition.

3.1.2. Alternative governance in a confrontational space

Economic competition between armed actors in Urabá and the Darién during the Colombian conflict was deeply intertwined with the prerogative of political and territorial control. On the one hand, controlling smuggling routes allowed the continuation of armed struggle and insurgent groups' political projects. Equally, the establishment of social governance became key to sustaining economic activity through the Darién. Ballvé discusses the FARC's technique of *rompiendo zona* ("zone breaking") in Urabá, which refers to the creation of strategic corridors, such as those through the Darién, for moving combatants, weapons, and later drugs, once narco trafficking became a key source of funding. Crucially, zone breaking also involved efforts to gain support from the local population, integrating it into the FARC's territorial and political project.¹³²

Access to strategic smuggling routes has long depended on social control - a dynamic that persists today in how the CDG manages migration through the Darién. Understanding the role of alternative governance in the region during the Colombian Conflict is therefore essential to grasp the continuity of these practices in 2025. Building and maintaining a strong social foothold has been, and remains, crucial for armed groups operating in Urabá. As Ballvé argues, "Guerrilla-controlled territories were not anti-state or states in waiting. They were intricately intertwined with well-established, formal governmental practices and institutional formations."¹³³

For the FARC as well as the EPL, these "institutional formations" were central to their strategies, facilitated by their dual structures of armed guerrilla activity and organized political engagement. For the FARC, this was the Unión Patriótica (UP), founded in 1985 as part of peace negotiations and political participation efforts. In the case of the EPL, its political party was the *Frente Popular* (Popular Front; FP), founded in

¹³⁰ García, C.I. (2004). Urabá. Procesos de Guerra y Paz en una Región de Triple Frontera. In: *Red de Estudios de Espacio y Territorio. (RET) Dimensiones Territoriales de la Guerra y de la Paz*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, pp.703–719.

¹³¹ Plamondon, O. (2008). *Social Forces and the Colombian Form of State*. [online] Centre d'études sur l'intégration et la mondialisation (CEIM). Available at: <https://ceim.uqam.ca/db/spip.php?article4664> [Accessed 2 May 2025].

¹³² Ballvé, T. (2020). *The Frontier Effect*. Cornell University Press. Pg 38

¹³³ Ibid. pg 43

1986.¹³⁴ The success of both parties came from their associated trade unions, formed for banana workers. Through the UP, the FARC played a crucial role in establishing an alternative spatial and political order in the Urabá region and established long-term infrastructure that supported grassroots organisations through cooperatives, health clinics, schools, and community councils (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*).¹³⁵ Using the administrative and financial resources of local governments, the UP institutionalised many of the FARC's early political initiatives. After obtaining many local offices, the UP formed the Urabá Association of municipalities (MADU), a regional partnership that enabled coordinated development projects and the pooling of resources across towns. It mirrored the FARC's concept of “combining all forms of struggle,” which included electoral politics and grassroots organising.¹³⁶

As argued by Grajales, the development of the FARC in peripheral areas such as the Darién was “not enabled by statelessness... but more accurately by state marginalisation, as people and territories were pushed back beyond the perimeter of the imagined nation state.”¹³⁷ Reading this dynamic through the lens of *alternative governance* we observe that Urabá and the Darién are by no means *ungoverned spaces*, as many reports would suggest, rather *alternatively governed spaces*. An “alternative” that must be understood as an alternative to Westphalian notions of monopolising control over a given territory. An alternative that often carries connotations of state weakness or incapacity. The case of paramilitarism and the AUC in the Darién demonstrates the reverse of the conventional narrative: rather than being absent or weak, the state actively enabled alternative authorities to advance its own interests. It demonstrates that the state's ability to act independently and pursue its goals often relies on, and is shaped by, its relationships with non-state actors. In seeking to counter violent leftist groups, the Colombian state helped shape the Darién by empowering right-wing armed actors, all within a complex web of national, transnational, and non-state political and economic interests.

¹³⁴ Ibid. pg 44

¹³⁵ Verdad Abierta (2016). *El difícil equilibrio entre las Farc y las juntas de Acción Comunal en el Caguán* | *VerdadAbierta.com*. [online] VerdadAbierta.com. Available at: <https://verdadabierta.com/el-dificil-equilibrio-entre-las-farc-y-las-juntas-de-accion-comunal-en-el-caguan/>.

¹³⁶ Ballvé, T. (2020). *The Frontier Effect*. Cornell University Press. Pg 46

¹³⁷ Grajales, J. (2021). *Agrarian Capitalism, War and Peace in Colombia Beyond Dispossession*. Routledge. pg 10

3.2 The rise of paramilitary actors: the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia

3.2.1 Understanding paramilitarism and statehood in Colombia

The emergence of the AUC must first be situated within a theoretical framework of paramilitarism. Arjona and Kalyvas define paramilitaries as “armed groups that are directly or indirectly connected with the state and its local agents, either formed by the state or tolerated by it, but which exist outside its formal structure.”¹³⁸ A Weberian perspective sees paramilitarism as a symptom of state weakness, the failure to monopolize legitimate violence.¹³⁹ However, this thesis adopts a neo-Weberian lens, viewing paramilitarism as embedded in Colombian state practices. Rather than an aberration, it has historically functioned as part of the state's political, military, and economic strategy. In 1990s Colombia, state authority was tied to international investment, while private companies depended on neoliberal reforms. This mutual dependence underpinned a development model based on *embedded autonomy*. Leftist guerrillas threatened both the state and capital, aligning the security interests of public institutions and private actors. It is this convergence that fuelled the rise of paramilitarism.

3.2.2 The rise of paramilitarism in the Darién from 1981 to 1997

One of Colombia's earliest paramilitary groups was *Muerte a Secuestradores* (Death to Kidnappers; MAS), active between 1981 and 1983. Formed to combat guerrillas and protect economic interests, MAS emerged from meetings in Puerto Boyacá involving Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel, local politicians, cattle ranchers, and representatives from the Texas Petroleum Company (now Texaco).¹⁴⁰ A 1983 government investigation found that 59 MAS crimes involved police or military personnel.¹⁴¹ To formalise these ties, the *Asociación Campesina de Ganaderos y Agricultores del Magdalena Medio* (ACDEGAM) was established as MAS's legal front. ACDEGAM suppressed labour movements while

¹³⁸ Arjona, A. and Kalyvas, S. (2005). Paramilitarismo: una perspectiva teórica. In: *El poder paramilitar*. Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, pp.25–45. pg 29. My translation.

¹³⁹ Bonilla, N.S. (2024). Paramilitarisme. *Dictionnaire Politique de l'Amérique latine*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/12tkc>.

¹⁴⁰ HRW (1996). *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military - Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*. [online] www.hrw.org. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1996/killer2.htm>.

¹⁴¹ Simons, G.L. (2004). *Colombia: A Brutal History*. Saqi Books. pg 56.

funding infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, and bridges.¹⁴² In Urabá, paramilitarism took institutional form with the creation of the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU) in 1994, led by Fidel and Carlos Castaño. The Castaños - among Colombia's wealthiest landowners - held extensive estates across Antioquia, Córdoba, and Chocó. Upon its founding, the ACCU frequently collaborated with the Colombian army's Bomboná Battalion, which operated in areas aligned with Castaño landholdings.¹⁴³ In 1997, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) was established as a coalition of paramilitary forces, largely dominated by the ACCU.¹⁴⁴

3.2.3 Paramilitarism, Private Interests, and Governance in the Darién from 1997

In the 1990s, guerrilla groups like the FARC and ELN began expanding from Colombia's peripheries - such as the Darién - toward political and economic centres. Simultaneously, paramilitary forces, originally concentrated in central agricultural regions, moved outward to suppress guerrilla expansion. As Grajales argues, "The dynamics of the armed conflict of the 1990s can be boiled down to this twofold expansion, with guerrillas moving inward from the outskirts to the centre, and paramilitaries expanding from the centre into the outskirts."¹⁴⁵

Despite widespread atrocities and their terrorist designation by the international community, the AUC was openly contracted by multinational companies to protect corporate interests. The most emblematic case is that of the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Bananas). Between 1997 and 2004, Chiquita paid the AUC \$1.7 million to act as a private security force. A 2007 court case revealed that the company financed arms imports from the U.S. to equip the AUC. Although Chiquita later claimed these payments were extorted, evidence shows the AUC was hired to repress unions, discipline workers, and protect plantations from guerrillas.¹⁴⁶ In the early 1990s, Urabá counted approximately 17,000 banana workers, with 95% represented by the union SINTRAINAGRO. By 2003, 844 union leaders had been killed by the AUC, making it

¹⁴² Ibid pg 57

¹⁴³ Nazih Richani (2000). The Paramilitary Connection. *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 34(2), pp.38–41. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2000.11722632> pg 39.

¹⁴⁴ Hristov, J. (2009). *Blood and Capital*. [online] Google Books. Available at: https://books.google.fr/books?id=cb49FuJaaCwC&pg=PA65&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false pg 71.

¹⁴⁵ Grajales, J. (2021). *Agrarian Capitalism, War and Peace in Colombia Beyond Dispossession*. Routledge. pg 11

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, L. (2024). *U.S. banana giant ordered to pay \$38m to families of Colombian men killed by death squads*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/11/chiquita-banana-deaths-lawsuit-colombia>.

the most targeted union in Colombia.¹⁴⁷ The company's security chief in Colombia from 1989 to 2000, Buck Keiser, was found to have facilitated payments to both the AUC and the FARC, approved by Chiquita executives.¹⁴⁸ A former Chiquita employee, at the time working for a major banana supplier to British and Irish supermarkets visited the Colombian plantations in 1999. He recalled his time spent with Keiser, who's security arrangements involved the regular army:

“Whoever paid the money got away with whatever they got away with. When we got to the banana plantation... there was a tank parked up at the crossroads... and army soldiers going through on either side of us... like spotty 17-year-olds. But the guy said they had to pay the army to set this up.”¹⁴⁹ (interview, former Chiquita Bananas employee, May 2025)

This testimony reflects how multinational corporations, paramilitary groups, insurgents, and state forces coexisted through mutually beneficial arrangements. By 1999, the AUC was also deeply involved in drug trafficking, with cocaine smuggled through the Darién and abroad via Chiquita cargo ships. These operations were facilitated through the port of Turbo, which was not deep water.¹⁵⁰

3.2.4 The role of institutional actors: Enabling and embedding paramilitaries

In Urabá and the Darién - regions defined by extractive economies and peripheral governance, paramilitarism must be understood not as a symptom of state absence, but as a deliberate strategy of governance, wherein the state nurtured relations with multiple violent actors to secure its political and economic objectives. The lens of embedded autonomy invites us to pay attention to data and existing scholarship in order to analyse the state's role in the rise of paramilitarism more clearly.

The legal foundation for the emergence of paramilitarism was Law 48 of 1968, which allowed the state to establish civil patrols with military-grade weapons. The aim was to legalise the creation of private armies, to protect rural farmland and support

¹⁴⁷ Hough, P.A. (2022). *At the Margins of the Global Market: Making Commodities, Workers, and Crisis in Rural Colombia*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009036757> pg 127.

¹⁴⁸ Evans, M., 2018. *The Chiquita 13: Profiles of banana officials accused of crimes against humanity*. National Security Archive, 21 December. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/colombia-chiquita-papers/2018-12-21/chiquita-13-profiles-banana-officials-accused-crimes-against-humanity> [Accessed 5 May 2025].

¹⁴⁹ Former Employee at Chiquita Bananas. (2025) *Interview with author* [remote]. Requested anonymity. 5 May.

¹⁵⁰ *Puerto de Turbo, in the Gulf of Urabá, Colombia, is undergoing expansion under the Plan de Acción 2025 to increase capacity and improve infrastructure, including a 4.3 km bypass around Nueva Colonia and road upgrades; the port's channel currently reaches depths of 12.5–13.7 meters*

military operations against the FARC and the ELN.¹⁵¹ State-supported paramilitarism backfired, however, in the 1970s and 1980s due to the explosion of the Colombian drug trade. This allowed wealthy drug-trafficking landowners to raise private armies and consolidate their already powerful political influence, leading to countless civilian deaths. In 1989, under the administration of Virgilio Barco, the government passed four decrees: creating a commission for the reduction of paramilitary violence, establishing an anti-paramilitary police force, ending the privileges offered under Law 48 of 1968, and establishing criminal penalties for individuals directly or indirectly involved in paramilitarism.¹⁵² However, most members of the commission were supporters of paramilitarism, the police force focussed more on narcotics labs than paramilitaries themselves, and existing paramilitary groups were not outlawed.

In the 1990s, state-supported paramilitarism therefore increased. The 1990 Armed Forces Directive No. 200-05/91, an intelligence collaboration operation with the U.S. Military and the CIA, established secret intelligence networks to combat insurgency. According to Human Rights Watch, this reinforced covert collaboration between the government and paramilitaries, that allowed “Colombian military to fight a dirty war and Colombian officialdom to deny it.”¹⁵³ In 1994, César Gaviria’s government created the CONVIVIR programme, referring to Servicios Especiales de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada (Special Vigilance and Private Security Services).¹⁵⁴ CONVIVIR was essentially a revival of Law 48 of 1968 and encouraged the establishment of neighbourhood watch vigilante groups. After the decrees of 1989, many pre-existing paramilitary groups reformed through CONVIVIR. In Urabá, there were twelve CONVIVIR groups by 1997, with their headquarters in the 17th Brigade military base.¹⁵⁵ It was through state supported CONVIVIR groups, especially La Tagua del Darién, that Chiquita made its payments to the AUC.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Holroyd, R. (2013). The Twilight of the Colombian Paramilitary. *Past Imperfect*, [online] 17. doi:<https://doi.org/10.21971/P7QS3W>.

¹⁵² Mendez, J.E. and Human Rights Watch (1990). *The ‘Drug War’ in Colombia: The Neglected Tragedy of Political Violence Americas Watch report*. [online] Available at: https://book.s.google.fr/books?id=ZDd4qv3HwSYC&printsec=copyright&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false. Pg 13

¹⁵³ HRW (1996). *Colombia’s Killer Networks: The Military - Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*. [online] www.hrw.org. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1996/killer2.htm>. Pg

¹⁵⁴ InSight Crime (2011). *AUC*. [online] InSight Crime. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organizedcrime-news/auc-profile/>.

¹⁵⁵ Grajales, J. (2017). Private Security and Paramilitarism in Colombia: Governing in the Midst of Violence. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 9(3), pp.27–48. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802x1700900302>.

¹⁵⁶ National Security Archive and Evans, M. (2018). *The Chiquita 13: Profiles of Banana Officials Accused of Crimes Against Humanity* | *National Security Archive*. [online] nsarchive.gwu.edu. Available at:

In 2006, the direct role of the state in this dynamic was uncovered during the *parapolítica* (parapolitics) scandal during which 132 congress members were investigated for direct collaboration with the AUC. Álvaro Uribe, the former governor of Antioquia and President of Colombia from 2002 to 2010, was even taken into custody and still stands accused of implication today. Thirty-two politicians were convicted, including Uribe's cousin and President of the Congress, Mario Uribe Escobar.¹⁵⁷ As argued by Grajales, paramilitarism in Colombia represents an “entanglement of violence and state formation.”¹⁵⁸ Therefore, it is not a reflection of state failure, as paramilitary power was by no means exterior to state apparatus. Nor should paramilitarism be considered as state capture, in which the state is victim of predatory influence by criminal groups.

Crucially, paramilitarism in Colombia directs our interrogation to the nature of the public institutions. The Colombian state is not a single homogenous actor, but a complex composition of institutions and individuals, underpinned by competing, sometimes clientelist interests.¹⁵⁹ In this sense, the AUC cannot be considered as a mere state contractor, transferred a portion of state violence, as this overshadows relationships between the executive and the judiciary, the military and the judiciary and the power dynamics within the government. CONVIVIR thus represents “government in the midst of violence” in which the state governs both through violence and governs the exercise of violence itself.¹⁶⁰ This idea can be considered as an “economy of violence” referring to “the relatively stable organisation of interactions (competition, cooperation, delegation) between actors capable of using violence or the threat of it” to pursue their interests.¹⁶¹

Returning to the notion of *embedded autonomy*, the active role of institutional actors in the empowerment of paramilitaries in the Darién may be considered within a broader development project with the protection of capital interests as a priority. We can trace a

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefingbook/colombia-chiquita-papers/2018-12-21/chiquita-13-profiles-banana-officials-accused-crimes-againsthumanity>.

¹⁵⁷ Brodzinsky, S. (2008). *Colombia's 'parapolitics' scandal casts shadow over president*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/23/colombia>.

¹⁵⁸ I Grajales, J. (2017). Private Security and Paramilitarism in Colombia: Governing in the Midst of Violence. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 9(3), pp.27–48. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802x1700900302>. pg 31

¹⁵⁹ Mintz, A., Valentino, N.A. and Wayne, C. (2021). The Limitations of the Unitary Actor Model of Government. In: *Beyond Rationality: Behavioral Political Science in the 21st Century*. [online] Cambridge University Press. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009029827>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid pg 31

¹⁶¹ Grajales, J. and Le Cour Grandmaison, R. (2019). *L'État malgré tout. Produire l'autorité dans la violence*. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355782002_L pg 9. My translation.

long history of peripheral development in the Darién, followed by structural economic reforms that further marginalised its local population, accompanied by leftist guerrilla movements and unions proposing an alternative to private interest-based governance, whose own role became entangled with illicit economies in the region.

The AUC's entanglement with multinational capital and illicit economies propelled it to national prominence, becoming responsible for 46% of civilian deaths during the conflict.¹⁶² Therefore, as argued by Rivas and Duncan, Colombian paramilitarism represents a “complex process in which certain forms of coercion emerged to protect capital at the regional level. Eventually, these forms of coercion became in themselves a means to produce capital, and as a result they obtained an autonomous power from regional economic elites.”¹⁶³ Hristov argues that in this context, the rise of the AUC can be attributed to the dilemma between the state's difficulty in maintaining legitimacy amongst civil society due to the impacts of neoliberal reforms, while still having to adhere to international human rights.¹⁶⁴¹⁶³ However, this thesis contends that rather than to save face in a context of economic inequalities, violence and capital were inextricably linked in Urabá. Paramilitarism and privatised violence emerged as the guarantor of a wider peripheral development model based on embedded state and non-state cooperation.

3.3 The emergence of the Gulf Clan from a context of controversial paramilitary demobilisation

The Gulf Clan, the primary armed group involved in migration management in the Darién, emerged from a paramilitary demobilisation process that was generally considered flawed and incomplete. Between 2003 and 2006, the AUC was demobilised, beginning with the Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement between the government and the AUC. Article 1 defined the purpose of the agreement as the “strengthening of democratic governance and the restoration of the monopoly on the use of force in the hands of the

¹⁶² Velez, S.B. (2024). “There has not been enough attention paid to business’ involvement in paramilitarism’: Lawyer who represented Colombian families against Chiquita (Interview) - Latin America Reports. [online] Latin America Reports. Available at: <https://latinamericareports.com/there-has-not-been-enough-attention-paid-to-business-involvement-in-paramilitarism-lawyer-who-represented-colombian-families-against-chiquitainterview/9236/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

¹⁶³ Rivera and Duncan (2018). *Colombian Paramilitaries: From Death Squads to State Competitors*. The Global South, 12(2), p.109. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.12.2.06>.

¹⁶⁴ Hristov, J. (2014). *Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond*. [online] Pluto Press. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p86g>.

state”.¹⁶⁵ Thus the agreement begins with the admission of an economy of violence in Colombia between state and non-state actors. This thesis considers that this economy of violence was a cornerstone of Colombian development policy, and that despite the demobilisation of the AUC and a will to reassert Weberian state authority, in Urabá and the Darién, forms of shared governance between institutional and alternative actors persist.

The demobilisation process was framed as a peace process, characterised by transitional justice mechanisms such as the 2005 *Ley de Justicia y Paz* (Justice and Peace Law), which controversially reduced sentences for soldiers responsible for crimes against humanity.¹⁶⁶ However, several critiques have been raised against the AUC’s demobilisation, as outlined by Nussio.¹⁶⁷ Firstly, the notion of a *peace process* was undermined by the historic cooperation, rather than conflict, between the state and the AUC such as the *parapolitics* scandal. This presented the agreement as but a continuation of backdoor cooperation. Secondly, disarmament was not completed, with most handed in weapons being old or obsolete, and the rest being hidden due to the fragility of trust between parties. Thirdly, and most crucially, new cycles of violence emerged from the demobilisation process with the rise of successor organisations, composed partially of former AUC members.¹⁶⁸

The CDG is a key example of this. Although the group’s operations began in the Gulf of Urabá, its origins lie in the Orinoquía region, where narco-paramilitary leader Daniel Rendón Herrera (“Don Mario”) operated within the *Centauros Bloc*, a military faction of the AUC. Initially the group was known as *Clan Úsuga* or *Los Urabeños* (named after the Urabá region), although in official publications it increasingly used the name *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia; AGC). In 2016, portrayed as a will to move away from their paramilitary roots in the wake of the 2016 Peace Agreement in Colombia, the CDG announced its new official name: the

¹⁶⁵ Acuerdo de Santa Fe de Ralito (2004) *Acuerdo de Santa Fe de Ralito*. Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA). Available at: <https://www.mapp-oea.org/wp-content/uploads/documentos/acuerdos/ACUERDO%20DE%20SANTA%20FE%20DE%20RALITO.pdf> pg 1. My translation.

¹⁶⁶ Nussio, E. (2011). The Demobilisation of Paramilitaries in Colombia. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, [online] 6(2), pp.88–92. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/48603404>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ CNRR (2010) *La reintegración: logros en medio de rearmes y dificultades no resueltas. II Informe de la Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación*. Bogotá: CNRR.

Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (Gaitanist Army of Colombia; EGC).¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the most used name remains the Gulf Clan, referencing their geographical stronghold in the Gulf of Urabá, the eastern coast of the Darién Gap.

A debate exists regarding the status of organisations such as the CDG. From the transitional justice perspective, the Colombian National Centre for Historical Memory uses *Grupos Armados Posdesmovilización* (Armed Post-Demobilisation Groups), arguing that such groups have different structures and a down-scaled territorial scope compared to the AUC.¹⁷⁰ The Colombian State typically the labels *Grupos Armados Organizados* (Organised Armed Groups) or *Grupos Delictivos Organizados* (Organised Criminal Groups), emphasising their role in the drugs trade. The term “neo-paramilitary group” is used by organisations such as *Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz* (Institute for Development and Peace Studies; INDEPAZ).¹⁷¹ This term highlights the strengthening of the CDG in the Darién region. Their consolidation involves active combat with rival groups in areas previously controlled by the FARC, as well as increased extortion and collaboration with local gangs. The group adopts military-style discourse, referring to individuals as military objectives and using paramilitary language in their acronyms.¹⁷²

This thesis considers the CDG a *paramilitary structure*, a term provided by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT).¹⁷³ Framing the CDG as a *paramilitary structure* not only highlights paramilitary character, while shifting focus away from a misleading sense of novelty implied by the “neo” prefix. Just as important as understanding the nature of the group itself, is recognising the political and economic structures it appropriated, left largely intact by a demobilisation process that proved more partial than transformative.

These structures may be resumed through the notion of the *complejo paramilitar* (paramilitary complex), referring to a persistent nexus of interests between armed

¹⁶⁹ Beltrán, D. (2024). *El Clan del Golfo cambió de nombre, ahora se llama Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia: cuál es la razón*. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2024/03/06/el-clan-del-golfo-cambio-denombre-ahora-se-llaman-ejercito-gaitanista-de-colombia-cual-es-la-razon/>.

¹⁷⁰ Rodríguez, W. (2020). *Grupos armados posdesmovilización (2006 - 2015): trayectorias, rupturas y continuidades - Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*. [online] Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. Available at: <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/grupos-armados-posdesmovilizacion/>

¹⁷¹ INDEPAZ (2017). *Agresiones de neoparamilitares en Domingodó*. [online] Indepaz.org.co. Available at: <https://indepaz.org.co/agresiones-de-neoparamilitares-en-domingodo/>.

¹⁷² UNHRC and Oidhaco (2018). *Report on the Human Rights Situation In Colombia 2013-2017*. [online] Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/report-human-rights-situation-colombia-2013-2017-coordination-groupsand>.

¹⁷³ OBS (2018). *Colombia: No peace for human rights defenders, no peace without them*. [online] International Federation for Human Rights. Available at: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/colombia-no-peace-forhuman-rights-defenders-no-peace-without-them>.

groups, businesses, state agents and security forces.¹⁷⁴ In 2022, three military personnel including Leonardo Alfonso Barrero, the former commander of the Colombian military, remained under investigation for directly assisting the CDG.¹⁷⁵ It is thanks to its ability to appropriate this structure that the CDG today is Colombia's largest and most powerful armed organisation.

The demobilisation of the AUC did not dismantle the underlying political and economic structures that had sustained paramilitary governance in Colombia. Instead, it enabled a reconfiguration of armed power, as illustrated by the rise of the CDG. Far from emerging in a vacuum, the CDG built upon existing institutional, territorial, and economic networks - structures that remained largely intact after the AUC's formal disbandment. Rather than signifying a full restoration of state authority, the post-demobilisation period in regions such as Urabá and the Darién reveals how governance continues to be negotiated between state and non-state actors. This reflects a form of embeddedness in which state presence is not absent, but shaped by its entanglements with local interests, informal economies, and security networks. The CDG's consolidation within this landscape illustrates how alternative governance can persist not in opposition to the state, but through a selective accommodation of its authority.

This chapter has shown how the Darién is not an *ungoverned space* but an *alternatively governed space*. When looking at economic and political dynamics in the Darién through a neo-Weberian lens, we find that a peripheral development model based in embedded autonomy is at the root of alternative governance, and role of the CDG today. In the following chapter we demonstrate how a sharp increase in migration through the Darién in the last decade has illuminated and reconfigured alternative governance in the region.

¹⁷⁴ Indepaz (2017). *El complejo paramilitar se transforma* – *Indepaz*. [online] [Indepaz.org.co](https://indepaz.org.co). Available at: <https://indepaz.org.co/portfolio/el-complejo-paramilitar-se-transforma/>

¹⁷⁵ Alsema, A (2022). *Colombia's former armed forces chief accused of drug trafficking* - *Colombia News*. [online] *Colombia News*. Available at: <https://colombiareports.com/colombias-former-armed-forces-chief-accused-of-drugtrafficking/> [Accessed 5 May 2025].

CHAPTER 2:

Shedding a Different Light on Migration as a Journey... and a Commodity

Turning to the present, Chapter 2 explores the emergence of migration through the Darién as a structured and spatialised economy. Far from being a spontaneous humanitarian crisis or a mere challenge to state security, the migratory passage has become a central axis of local economic activity - one increasingly shaped by both formal institutions and informal actors. This chapter traces the development of what can be termed a “migration market,” in which alternative governance is not a “gap” but a condition that enables profit-making and regulatory control through non-state channels. By foregrounding the commodification of transit and the actors who govern it - from the CDG, to local communities, to state agents and transnational networks - the chapter reveals migration as a key site in which alternative governance is not only visible but operationalised. This approach further complicates simplistic binaries between state and non-state authority, exposing the interdependencies that underpin mobility governance in the Darién. In this chapter, we will present firstly the key factors and dynamics of migration through the Darién from 2010 to 2025. Secondly, we will demonstrate the establishment of a human mobility industry and the commodification of migration journeys by a variety of actors present in the Darién.

1. Migration dynamics in the Darién

1.1 Political economy approaches to migration

When adopting a political economy lens to understand migration, there are two main aspects to consider: migration as a result of global economy (1.1.1), and migration as an economy in itself (1.1.2).

1.1.1 Periphery-centre migration

Centre-periphery theories mobilised to explain the emergence of alternative forms of governance in the Darién due to its global and national economic marginalisation may also be applied to study migration through the region. Within the framework of Wallerstein’s World-Systems Theory, peripheral zones like the Darién are positioned structurally to export labour and raw resources to core zones, in a pattern that mirrors capital flows in the opposite direction. From this perspective, migration is

understood as a structural consequence of global capitalist integration, wherein underdevelopment is not an absence of development but rather a condition actively reproduced by the world economy.¹⁷⁶

However, this deterministic reading of centre-periphery dynamics has been challenged by scholars like de Haas, who argue that migration outcomes are shaped by reciprocal and non-linear relationships between structure and agency.¹⁷⁷ While dependency theorists generally view migration as detrimental to development, suggesting that it reinforces inequalities and drains peripheral regions of labour, de Haas proposes that both positive and negative effects can emerge, depending on institutional, policy, and socio-economic contexts. This critique is vital to avoid an overgeneralised portrayal of peripheral populations as passive victims of global forces, a frequent shortcoming of classical dependency theory.

As such, centre-periphery frameworks remain valuable in understanding why certain regions like the Darién become sites of intensified mobility, but they must be supplemented with agency-centred and meso-level approaches. Theories such as the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), the Livelihoods Approach, and the Transnational Perspective provide more nuanced accounts.¹⁷⁸ They recognise, for example, that households may use migration strategically (e.g. to diversify income), that remittances can have transformative effects if mediated through adequate institutions, and that migrants often maintain transnational ties that reshape both origin and destination contexts. Moreover, the “migration hump” described by Martin and Taylor disrupts the linear logic of dependency thinking, demonstrating that emigration often increases during early stages of economic development.¹⁷⁹ This adds further complexity to the analysis of the Darién: migration through this region is not only shaped by peripheral underdevelopment but also by increased mobility capacities among populations in transitional contexts.¹⁸⁰ Thus, the centre-periphery model provides a

¹⁷⁶ Wallerstein, I. (1974) *The modern world-system I: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world economy in the sixteenth century*. New York: Academic Press.

¹⁷⁷ de Haas, H. (2010). Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective. *International Migration Review*, 44(1), pp.227–264.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid pg 242

¹⁷⁹ Martin, P.L. and Taylor, E.J. (1996). The anatomy of a migration hump. *Development strategy, employment and migration : insights from models*. [online] Available at: <https://www.econbiz.de/Record/the-anatomy-of-a-migrationhump-martin-philip/10001294172>.

¹⁸⁰ Agunias, D.R. and Newland, K. (2007) *A new surge of interest in migration and development*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available at: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MigDevPB_041807.pdf (Accessed: 7 May 2025).

macro-structural lens, but its limitations can be addressed by integrating recent scholarship that insists on the co-construction of migration and development across multiple scales, from household decisions to state policies and global economic structures.

While the approaches to understanding migration between sending and receiving countries are fundamental to the debate, in the case of migration through the Darién, a second element of interrogation needs to be addressed. We must question not only *why* individuals migrate, but also *how* people migrate. Which routes are chosen? What are the costs involved? What are the risks involved? What are the alternative options? Are there really any alternative options? The study of the factors of migration through the Darién warrants an investigation into why individuals chose to transit through the world's most dangerous migration route. A convergence of factors have spurred passage through the Darién in recent years. These include factors related to expulsion: natural disasters, political, economic and security crises. Transit through the Darién is also tightly linked to a lack of safer options. Thus, the humanitarian situation in the Darién is not only a secondary effect of crises in origin countries. It is also a politically produced consequence of the restrictive immigration policies that has rendered the Darién a last resort. This chapter aims to ascertain what happens when a last-resort route traverses an alternatively governed region, and how this shapes the local political economy of migration.

1.1.2 The Migration Industry

Engaging with Hernández-Léon's concept of the "migration industry," migration through the Darién can be understood as the product of an international configuration of state and non-state actors that together give rise to a transit economy. Hernández Léon defines the migration industry as the "ensemble of entrepreneurs, businesses, and services which, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, facilitate and sustain international migration."¹⁸¹ In this framework, transit is co-produced: states delineate irregular spaces of movement through restrictive policies, while private actors appropriate these spaces by offering migratory services. Put simply, smugglers exist because states draw borders; immigration lawyers exist because states criminalise migration. Irregular routes like the Darién are managed by a range of private actors

¹⁸¹ Hernandez-Leon, R. (2005). The Migration Industry in the Mexico-U.S. Migratory System. *escholarship.org*. [online] Available at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3hg44330>.

precisely because states prohibit the use of regular channels. Where migration is rendered irregular, markets inevitably emerge. These profiteering actors vary widely, encompassing remittance firms, travel agencies, immigration lawyers, transport providers, and smugglers.

We can consider these dynamics within the framework of embedded autonomy to understand the production of wealth on the frontier of formality and informality, of legality and illegality. In the Darién, as this thesis argues, this embedded autonomy has long existed due to its peripheral status and has contributed the persistence of alternative forms of governance. When a region like the Darién is traversed by hundreds of thousands of migrants each year, a migration industry emerges. It is rooted in the institutional construction of illegality and shaped by a socio-economic context that has historically privileged commodification and market forces over state regulatory presence.

1.2 Migration Trends in the Darién

The statistics offered by the Panamanian National Migration Service regarding irregular transit through the Darién date back to 2010.¹⁸² They allow us to highlight key characteristics of the Darién as a migration route in recent decades. The number of crossings has proven highly sensitive to major crises, both regional (e.g., among Haitians) and global (e.g., among Cameroonians in 2018–19; see Figure 3). While only a few nationalities were represented initially, the period under study has witnessed a growing diversification of migrant origins (see Figure 4). Examining migration dynamics through the Darién is essential to understanding broader migration trends, as it sheds light on both push and pull factors, as well as the evolving legal environment that shapes movement along particularly dangerous routes. This section provides a case-by-case synthesis of the main push and pull factors for the principal nationalities of origin represented. It then turns (Section 1.3) to complementary factors, most notably U.S.-Panama military cooperation, to shed light on the complex dynamics of reverse-flow migration.

¹⁸² Migración Panama (2025). *Estadísticas – Migración Panamá*. [online] www.migracion.gob.pa. Available at: <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/> [Accessed 6 May 2025].

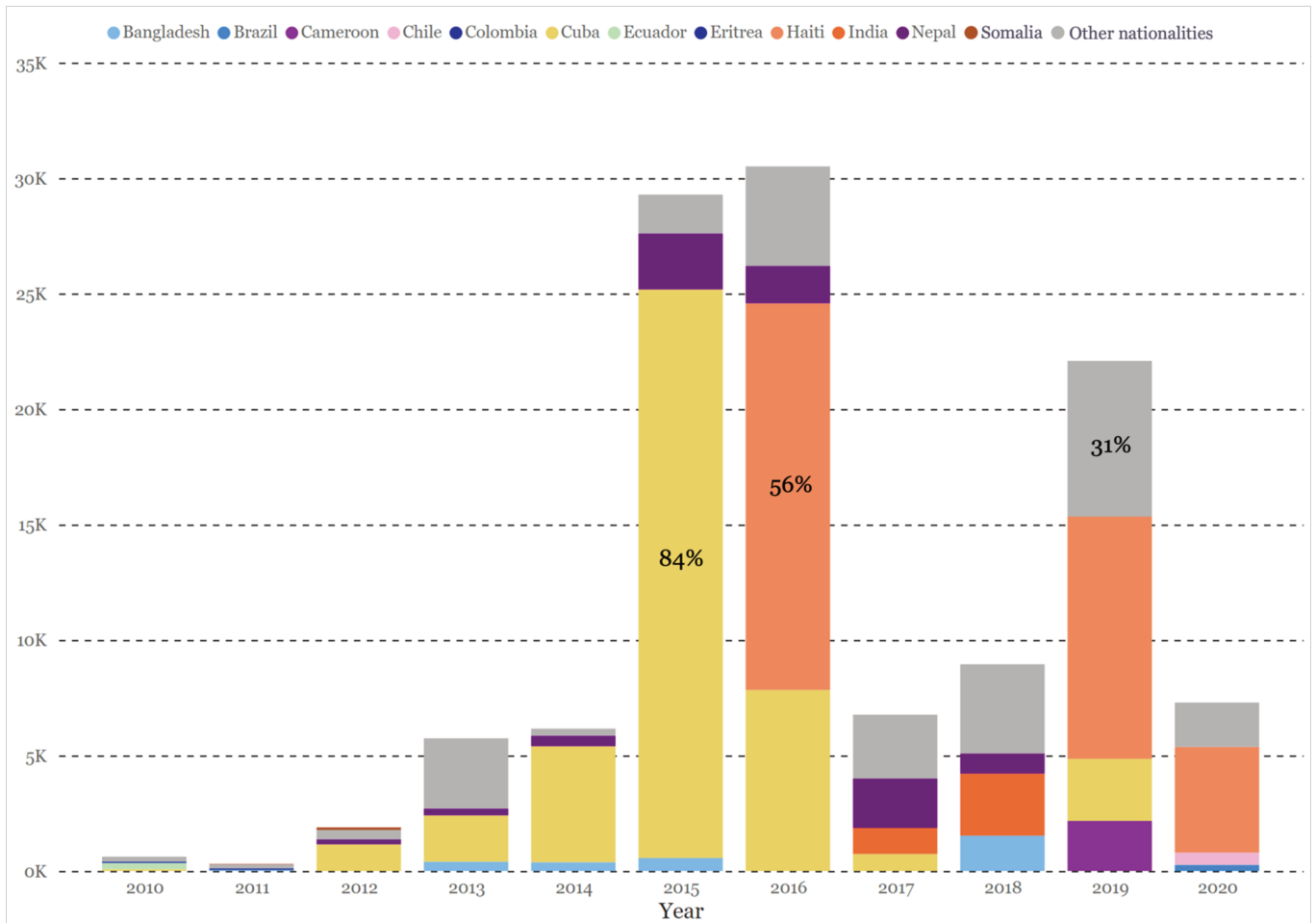
Figure 3: Migration trends in the Darién 2010 - 2025

This table represents the number of individuals having transited through the Darién from Colombia into Panama per year (2010 – 2025), highlighting the three most represented nationalities of origin.

Year	1st Origin Country	2nd Origin Country	3rd Origin Country	Total Migrants
2010	Ecuador (268)	Cuba (79)	Eritrea (60)	559
2011	Colombia (65)	Bangladesh (45)	Somalia (20)	283
2012	Cuba (1,154)	Nepal (213)	Somalia (112)	1,777
2013	Cuba (2,010)	Bangladesh (398)	Nepal (297)	3,051
2014	Cuba (5,026)	Nepal (468)	Bangladesh (377)	6,175
2015	Cuba (24,623)	Nepal (2,426)	Bangladesh (559)	29,289
2016	Haiti (16,742)	Cuba (7,383)	Nepal (1,619)	30,055
2017	Nepal (2,138)	India (1,127)	Cuba (736)	6,780
2018	India (2,962)	Bangladesh (1,525)	Nepal (868)	9,222
2019	Haiti (10,490)	Cuba (2,691)	Cameroon (2,168)	22,102
2020	Haiti (4,538)	Chile (531)	Brazil (262)	6,465
2021	Haiti (82,952)	Cuba (18,600)	Chile (9,587)	133,726
2022	Venezuela (150,327)	Ecuador (29,356)	Haiti (22,435)	248,284
2023	Venezuela (328,560)	Ecuador (57,250)	Haiti (46,422)	520,085
2024	Venezuela (209,897)	Colombia (17,529)	Ecuador (16,576)	302,203
2025 (Jan–Apr)	Venezuela (1,342)	Colombia (165)	Nepal (161)	2,904

Figure 4: Migration Through the Darién by Nationality (2010-2020)

This chart represents the number of individuals having crossed the Darién, between 2010-2020, highlighting the three most represented nationalities of origin.



Source: The author, with data from Migración Panama (2025). *Estadísticas – Migración Panamá*. [online] www.migracion.gob.pa. Available at: <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/> [Accessed 6 May 2025]

1.2.1 Cuban migration

Between 2012 and 2016, Cubans were the most represented national group crossing the Darién Gap. While economic hardship and political repression in Cuba served as key push factors, a major pull factor was the anticipated change in U.S. immigration policy. In 2014, President Obama and Fidel Castro initiated the political normalisation process known as the “Cuban Thaw.”¹⁸³ A central component of this process was the termination of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy, which had previously allowed Cubans who reached U.S. soil to apply for residency after one year. In 2017, this policy was

¹⁸³ Duany, J. (2017). *Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows*. [online] [migrationpolicy.org](https://www.migrationpolicy.org). Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows>.

replaced by a returns agreement that enabled U.S. authorities to deport Cubans who did not qualify for asylum.¹⁸⁴ As a result, between 2014 and 2017, many Cubans sought to emigrate before the new policy took effect, often travelling by land through South and Central America to reach the United States. This migration surge was also facilitated by the 2013 removal of the Cuban exit permit requirement.¹⁸⁵ Until late 2015, Ecuador was one of the few South American countries that allowed Cubans to enter without a visa, making it a popular starting point for overland journeys northward.¹⁸⁶¹⁸⁷ After Ecuador revoked this visa policy in December 2015, most Cubans began travelling through Guyana and then Venezuela before continuing their route toward the Darién and beyond.

1.2.2 Nepalese migration

Nepalese migration through the Darién also increased between 2012 and 2017, becoming the most represented nationality in 2017. This can mainly be attributed to the Gorkha earthquake of 2015 and its devastating socio-economic effects, in a country that was already unstable following the end of civil war in 2006. The tightening of U.S. visa and protection policy lead to a higher concentration of Nepalese migrants on irregular routes beginning in South America and passing through the Darién Gap.¹⁸⁸

1.2.3 Haitian migration

The 2010 earthquake in Haiti (popularly named the Goudou Goudou Earthquake) incited thousands of Haitians to seek economic opportunities on the South American continent particularly in Chile and Brazil (especially in hope of job

¹⁸⁴ White House. (2017) *Statement by the President on Cuban Immigration Policy*. 12 January. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/statement-president-cuban-immigrationpolicy> (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

¹⁸⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). (2013) *Cuba: New exit-permit rules for Cuban citizens, including requirements and procedures; situation of Cuban citizens who left under the previous rules and are in violation of the law; whether doctors encounter obstacles to obtain exit permits because of their profession*. 21 February. Available at: https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1086200/356324_en.html (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

¹⁸⁶ Passport Index (2025). *Passport Index 2025*. [online] Passport Index - Global Mobility Intelligence. Available at: <https://www.passportindex.org/fr/comparebyPassport.php?p1=cu&y1=2025> [Accessed 6 May 2025].

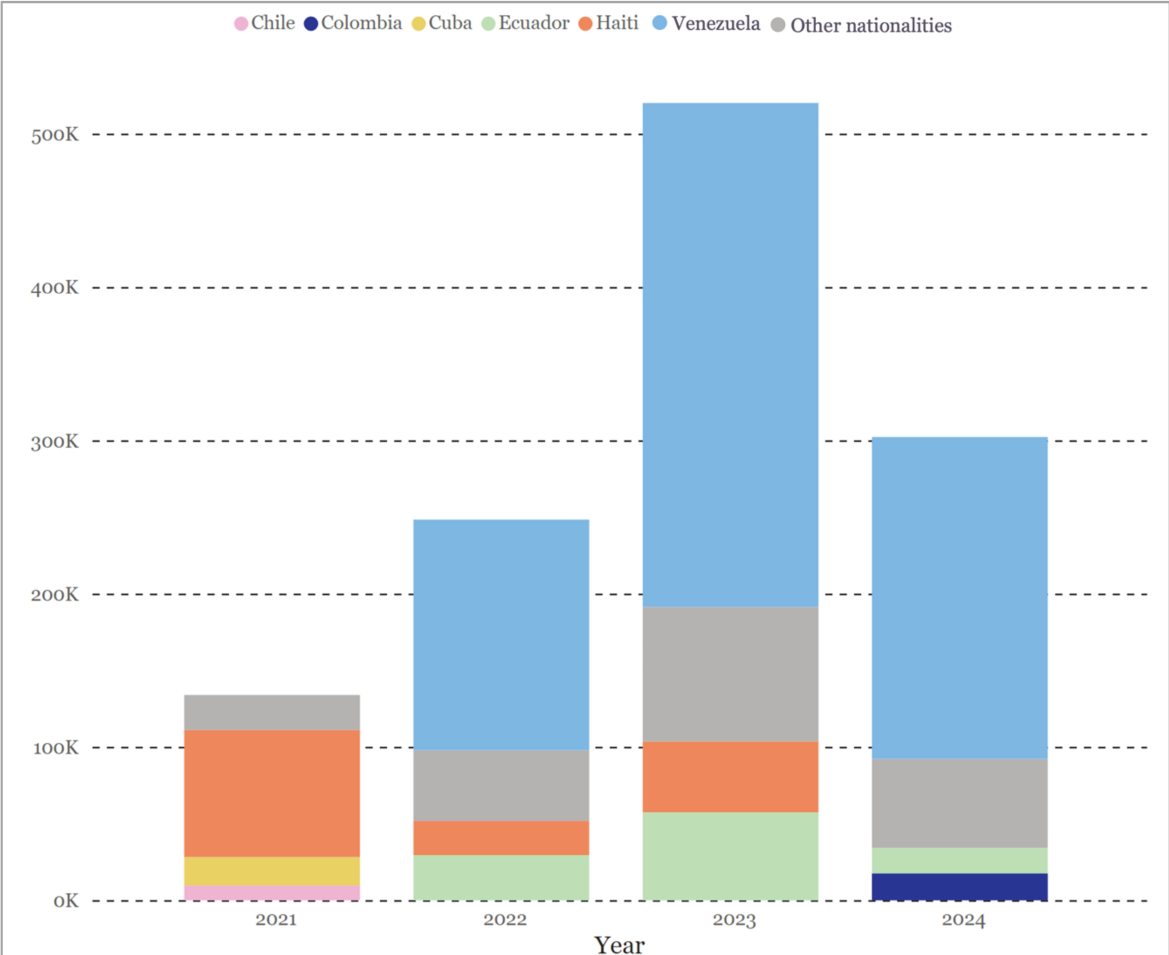
¹⁸⁷ BBC (2015). Stranded Cuban migrants to be allowed passage to the U.S.. *BBC News*. [online] 29 Dec. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35191828>.

¹⁸⁸ Reuters (2018). U.S. says to end protected status for 9,000 Nepalese immigrants. *Reuters*. [online] 26 Apr. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/asia-pacific/us-says-to-end-protected-status-for-9000nepalese-immigrants-idUSKBN1HX314/>.

opportunities related to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics).¹⁸⁹ In 2016, Haitian migration surged due to Hurricane Matthew, which coincided with decreasing economic opportunities for Haitians in South America, thus inciting thousands of Haitians to travel North through the Darién. 2021 was a convergence of political and security crises following the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, and yet another earthquake in Southern Haiti.¹⁹⁰ This led to the peak of Haitian transit through the Darién at 82,952 individuals in 2021 (see **figure 5**). Figures for Haitians have remained high ever since due to the ongoing security crisis.

Figure 5: Migration Through the Darién by Nationality (2021-2024)

This chart represents the number of individuals having crossed the Darién, between 2021- April 2024, organised by the three most represented nationalities.



Source: The author, with data from Migración Panama (2025). *Estadísticas – Migración Panamá*. [online] www.migracion.gob.pa. Available at: <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/> [Accessed 6 May 2025].

¹⁸⁹ Crawley, H. (2023). *From Despair to Hope? Securing Rights for Haitian Migrants in the New Brazil*. [online] United Nations University. Available at: <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/despair-hope-securing-rights-haitian-migrantsnew-brazil>.

¹⁹⁰ ONU Info (2022). L'année 2021 en Haïti a été marquée par une accélération des crises qui affectent le pays depuis des années. [online] ONU Info. Available at: <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2022/01/1112722>.

1.2.4 Venezuelan migration

From 2021 to 2024, unparalleled numbers of migrants crossed the Darién, peaking in 2023 at 520,085. This was largely due to the mass displacement of Venezuelans, standing at approximately 8.5 million people today, representing the largest ever displacement of Latin American people (see **figure 5**).¹⁹¹ Since 2013, Venezuela has faced an economic and political crisis rendering it one of the world's most unstable countries. The majority of displaced Venezuelans (6.5 million) currently reside in countries across Latin America, including 3 million in Colombia. However, increasing problems related to the difficulty in obtaining a legal status as well as a lack of economic opportunities have since pushed hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans to cross the Darién and make the journey to North America. One of the most impactful factors was a series of new visa requirements adopted by Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico for Venezuelans, making air travel to these countries very difficult.¹⁹²

1.3 Understanding migration through the Darién beyond ungoverned assumptions

To truly grasp the factors behind migration through the Darién, it is necessary to look beyond the push-factors in origin countries and intervening obstacles related to visa policy in transit countries. We must also take into account the role of *secondary migration*, changes in US immigration policy, the role of US-Panama cooperation in the externalisation of border control, and finally the relatively novel phenomenon of reverse-flow migration through the Darién from North to South.

1.3.1. Secondary migration as a lasting trend

First of all, migration through the Darién often involves the *secondary migration* of individuals having first migrated to neighbouring South American countries, before encountering difficulty and choosing to remigrate to North America.¹⁹³ This was the case

¹⁹¹ UNHCR (2024) Venezuela. – Situation Overview. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Venezuela%20-%20Situation%20Overview.pdf> (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

¹⁹² Human Rights Watch (2022) México/América Central: Nuevos visados hacen sufrir a venezolanos, 5 July. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2022/07/05/mexico/america-central-nuevos-visados-hacen-sufrirvenezolanos> (Accessed: 7 May 2025).

¹⁹³ UNHCR (1989). Problem of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Who Move in an Irregular Manner from a Country in Which They Had Already Found Protection*. UNHCR. [online]. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/problem-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-who-move-irregular-manner-country-which-they-had>.

for many Haitians, encountering racism and faltering economic opportunities in Brazil and Chile. It has also largely been the case for Venezuelans encountering legal and economic difficulty in neighbouring countries. This reminds us of an important element being that the number of migrants crossing the Darién is but a small proportion of the overall numbers for a given nationality. It can be considered as a culmination of push factors away from origin countries, pull factors to neighbouring countries, and factors impeaching alternative possibilities on less perilous routes, such as visa policies. When these pull factors cease to bear their fruits, they may transform into push factors for the journey north through the Darién. Nevertheless, as shown by ICG, many migrants crossing the Darién have not previously sought to settle elsewhere, even if secondary migration is present.¹⁹⁴

1.3.2 The influence of U.S. immigration policy

Secondly, transit through the Darién Gap has fluctuated over time in response to changes in U.S. immigration policy, which otherwise might have allowed more direct routes from origin countries to the United States. In 2017, President Trump's Executive Order 13769 (the Travel Ban, or "Muslim Ban") restricted regular entry for migrants from several Muslim-majority countries.¹⁹⁵ As a result, nationals from countries such as Cameroon, then the third most represented nationality crossing the Darién in 2019, increasingly chose the irregular route through the region. Access to the U.S. by land became more difficult under the first Trump administration due to the 2018 Zero Tolerance Policy, which led to expulsions for irregular border crossings, and the 2019 Migrant Protection Protocols, which required migrants to wait in Mexico for their asylum claims to be processed.¹⁹⁶

At the beginning of the Biden administration in 2021, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) was expanded to individuals from Venezuela and Haiti.¹⁹⁷ This became a factor for Haitians and Venezuelans having already migrated to neighbouring countries to continue to the USA via the Darién, as well as those still in their country of origin. In

¹⁹⁴ International Crisis Group (2023). Pg 15

¹⁹⁵ Immigration History (2019). Muslim Travel Ban. [online] Immigration History. Available at: <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/muslim-travel-ban/>.

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Mission to the UN (2018). National Statement of the United States of America on the Adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. [online] United States Mission to the United Nations. Available at: <https://usun.usmission.gov/national-statement-of-the-united-states-of-america-on-the-adoption-of-the-global-compact-for-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration/>.

¹⁹⁷ National Immigration Forum. (2025). *Temporary Protected Status (TPS): Fact Sheet*. [online] Available at: <https://immigrationforum.org/article/temporary-protected-status-fact-sheet/>.

2023, at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Biden ended the use of Title 42 of the Public Health Service Act of 1944, which, since 2020, had allowed the deportation of migrants arriving by land.¹⁹⁸ It was replaced by the “Circumnavigation of Lawful Pathways Rule” in 2023, denying the right to asylum to migrants having entered the USA through irregular means.¹⁹⁹ The proclamation titled “Securing the Border” introduced a major overhaul of U.S. asylum policy by significantly tightening eligibility criteria.²⁰⁰ Under this measure, asylum applications must be submitted through the CBP One app, effectively disqualifying individuals who enter the U.S. irregularly between official ports of entry. The policy also imposes a numerical threshold: if more than 2,500 people cross the border irregularly per day over a week, a ban on new asylum claims is triggered and remains in effect until the daily average drops below 1,500 for at least two weeks.

When comparing the development of U.S. immigration policy with the migration statistics, there are several observations to be made. Firstly, the change in presidential administration in 2021 should not be overestimated as a causal factor for the increase in migratory flow. Economic and social conditions in Latin-American countries also play an important role. Before the coronavirus pandemic, most displaced Venezuelans found refuge in South American countries. However, this pattern shifted significantly after public health restrictions were lifted and borders reopened in 2021. As North American economies recovered rapidly, Latin America and the Caribbean, hit harder by the pandemic than any other region, faced prolonged economic and social challenges. Global GDP dropped by 3%, whereas Latin American and Caribbean GDP dropped by 7%, reinforcing structural equalities that shape international migratory flows.²⁰¹ Furthermore, while the Biden administration extended the TPS, it generally pursued an increasingly restrictive immigration policy that restricted safe and legal routes while criminalising irregular ones. Many migrants having been initially expelled from the USA subsequently chose the Darién route in a reattempt to complete their migration journey.

¹⁹⁸ Kladzyk, R. (2021). *Timeline: How Title 42 came to be used on asylum seekers*. [online] El Paso Matters. Available at: <https://elpasomatters.org/2021/10/08/timeline-how-title-42-came-to-be-used-on-asylum-seekers/>.

¹⁹⁹ Murray Osorio (2024). *Understanding the Biden Administration’s Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Rule (CLP)*. [online] Murray Osorio. Available at: <https://www.murrayosorio.com/news/2024/november/understanding-the-bidenadministration-s-circumv/> [Accessed 7 May 2025].

²⁰⁰ Homeland Security (2024). *Securing the Border | Homeland Security*. [online] U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Available at: <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/securing-border>.

²⁰¹ The Economist (2021). *Why Latin America’s economy has been so badly hurt by covid-19*. [online] The Economist. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2021/05/13/why-latin-americas-economy-has-been-sobadly-hurt-by-covid-19>.

In this sense, migration through the Darién increased as for many nationalities, it became one of the only viable routes, despite the grave danger.

1.3.3 The role of border externalisation policy (U.S.-Panama cooperation)

On the 1st of July 2024, José Raúl Mulino was elected as President of Panama, under the promise to crack down on migration. During his inaugural speech, Mulino promised to “close” the Darién Gap and stop the flow of migrants through Panama towards the USA. Several days later, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the USA and Panama, agreeing that Panama would seal the Darién and in exchange the USA would fund border control and repatriation.²⁰² At the UN General Assembly, Mulino announced that “Panama is the new border of the United States”²⁰³

In Chapter 1, we showed the evolution of international attempts to open and close the Darién Gap, contributing to alternative forms of governance of the area. The U.S.-Panama deal reflects the latest initiative to close the Darién, an area that has long been characterised by a nexus of state and non-state actors controlling transit over the border. It is through this lens that it is difficult to conceive how a bilateral state agreement may overhaul the current dynamics in the Darién in the long term, especially when migratory movement is largely governed by alternative actors.

It is not the first time that the USA has utilised externalisation policy to halt transit through the Darién. This was particularly the case during the ‘Plan Colombia’ policy aiming to halt the international drug trade. Andreas studies how in the 1990s, the USA conditioned financial aid through the IMF to, on the one hand, neoliberal structural reform, and on the other hand, efforts to curtail the flow of international drugs through Latin America.²⁰⁴ In this sense, the USA simultaneously promoted state reduction through liberalisation, and state escalation through prohibiting the flow of drugs. A similar contradiction can be observed in the 1970s, as discussed in Chapter 1 regarding a desire to complete the PAH to link the Americas, whilst pressuring Colombia to do

²⁰² The Guardian (2024). Panama to shut down Darién Gap route in deal that will see U.S. pay to repatriate migrants. *The Guardian*. [online] 2 Jul. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/02/panama-to-shut-down-darien-gap-migrants-usa>.

²⁰³ Los Angeles Times (2024). *Petro se suma a la propuesta de Panamá de abrir una ‘ruta legal’ para migrantes por el Darién*. [online] Los Angeles Times . Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/internacional/articulo/2024-0925/petro-se-suma-a-la-propuesta-de-panama-de-abrir-una-ruta-legal-para-migrantes-por-el-darien> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

²⁰⁴ Andreas, P. (1995). Free market reform and drug market prohibition: Us policies at cross-purposes in Latin America. *Third World Quarterly*, 16(1), pp.75–88. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599550036248>.

more to limit the spread of foot and mouth disease northwards. In this regard, Andreas states:

“The compatibility of these two very different models of state-market relations is questionable, since legal and illegal markets are often inextricably intertwined. In many countries, the drug export sector is not isolated from, but integrated into, the national economy. Not only are they closely linked, but the informal drug economy is guided by many of the same market principles which regulate the formal economy. Thus, even as the USA seeks to expand the role of market forces and the private sector, the awkward reality in many Latin American countries is that the drug export industry is a leading market force and an integral component of the private sector.”²⁰⁵

Such contradictory demands are underpinned by disregard for the embedded autonomy of the Colombian state, given its development trajectory. The U.S. government considered liberalisation as a process favouring the alignment of international interests and a facilitator for cooperation on drug trafficking reduction. In reality, the reduction of the state led to what Cox calls the “internationalisation of the state”, referring to how the state’s role becomes about conforming to the demands of the international economy.²⁰⁶ This conformity makes very little distinction between legal and illegal markets, especially when these markets are so deeply intertwined, as the previous chapter demonstrated. This paradoxically enables resource flow through peripheral zones.

The comparison between U.S. migration externalisation policies and its efforts to curtail the drugs trade is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, for both migrants and drugs, the Darién is the only possible land passage for transit between South and North America and has historically been considered as a strategic point to facilitate or prevent resource flow. Secondly, both policies reveal a recurring pattern in which the USA treats peripheral territories like the Darién as buffer zones tasked with absorbing the externalities of global policy agendas, be it stopping cocaine or deterring migrants, without addressing the structural inequalities that make such flows inevitable. In both cases, the imposition of securitised, often militarised, control mechanisms outsourced to fragmented state authorities has not eliminated the flows but instead made them more dangerous and profitable for illicit actors.

²⁰⁵ Ibid pg 75

²⁰⁶ Cox, R.W., 1987. *Production, power, and world order: social forces in the making of history*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Thirdly, this parallel lies in the central role of paramilitary and non-state armed groups, which have historically managed key logistical and territorial aspects of both the drug trade and, more recently, migrant smuggling routes. Just as paramilitaries in Colombia have long been implicated in controlling coca production and trafficking corridors under the shadow of state tolerance or complicity, today the CDG operates semi-autonomously in the Darién, extracting rents from migration while maintaining a strategic presence in the region. This again highlights the contradiction in U.S. policy: while seeking to externalise enforcement, it often results in empowering violent intermediaries who govern by blending coercion, profit, and social control. Ultimately, this reflects a persistent paradox at the heart of U.S. externalisation policy: it seeks to build walls in regions where it simultaneously demands open markets, generating alternative forms of governance.

1.3.4 Reverse-flow migration since the Trump II administration

Since the beginning of President Trump's second term, a new phenomenon is being observed in the Darién, labelled as *reverse-flow* migration. On the 13th of March, 2025 the Panamanian President Mulino declared that the Darién Gap was closed.²⁰⁷ The Panamanian government cited a 99% reduction in migration since July 2024, which would lead to the progressive dismantling of humanitarian infrastructure on the Panamanian side of the border and the full closure of the Darién.²⁰⁸ Rather than signalling a dramatic reduction in the causes of migratory movement, the drop in passage can be attributed to the arrival of President Trump and a new series of restrictive immigration policies particularly at the Mexican border. However, rather than the Darién being truly closed, in recent months, thousands of migrants have crossed the Darién in the opposite direction, embarking on boats in the Panamanian port of Obaldía (close to the town of Armila – see **figure 6**), and arriving on the shores of Necoclí.²⁰⁹ Most of these people are individuals, who blocked either in Central America or in Mexico have decided to return to South America.

²⁰⁷ Courrier International (2025). Le Panama annonce la fermeture progressive de l'accès à la jungle du Darién. [online] Yahoo News. Available at: <https://fr.news.yahoo.com/panama-annonce-fermeture-progressive-1163236555.html> [Accessed 7 May 2025].

²⁰⁸ Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (2025). Éxito con el flujo migratorio inverso: 99% menos entran por Darién. [online] Ministerio de Seguridad Pública. Available at: <https://www.minseg.gob.pa/2025/03/exito-con-el-flujomigratorio-inverso-99-menos-entran-por-darien/> [Accessed 7 May 2025].

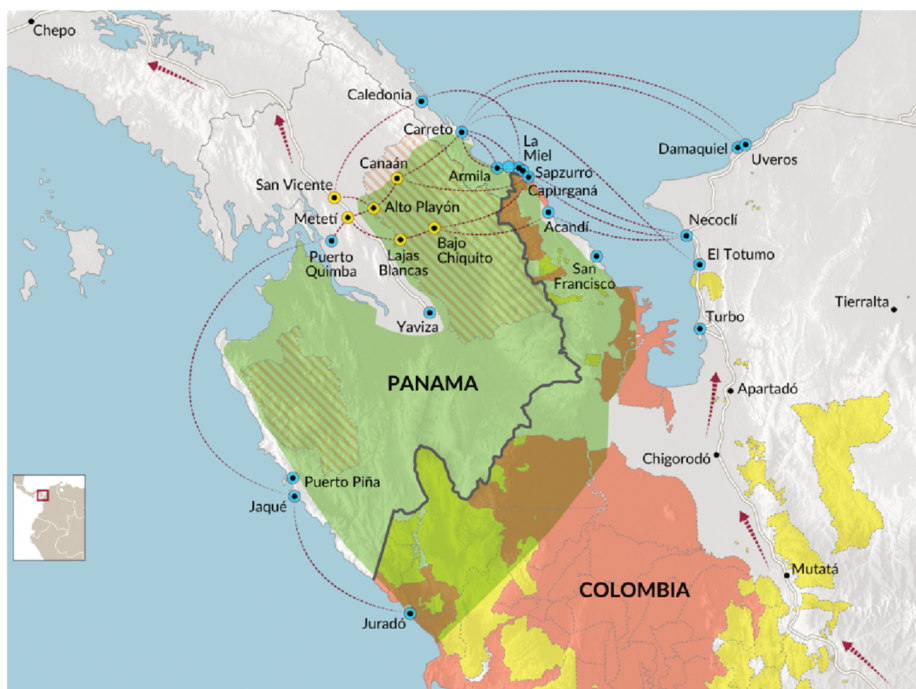
²⁰⁹ Rangel Estrada, J.P. (2025). Pg 2

Now that we have analysed the main migration patterns in the Darién and shown the role of foreign actors in shaping them, we will demonstrate in what way migration interacts with local political economies of alternative governance in the Darién.

2. Profiting from the journey through the Darién

Firstly, it is important to note that the routes used to cross the Darién have varied over time and continue to vary based on a convergence of factors including legal restrictions, illegal activity and cost. The following map produced by the *Fundación Ideas para la Paz* shows the variety of routes used by migrants in August 2022:²¹⁰

Figure 6: Migration routes through the Darién



Source: *Tobo, Cajiao and Restrepo 2022*

As can be seen in the map, several routes are possible to reach Panama from Colombia, including via the Atlantic Sea, bypassing the Darién rainforest and via the Caribbean Sea, also arriving directly in Panamanian ports. However, over recent years the most used route by far has been traversing the Gulf of Urabá by boat before crossing the Darién on foot.²¹¹ In order to operationalise our political economy framework to study the Darién crossing, we consider that migrants in the Darién traverse the free-

²¹⁰ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022).

²¹¹ Ibid

market economy of Necoclí, followed by the communitarian economy of Chocó. This distinction between two economies on each side of the Gulf of Urabá was highlighted to us in an interview with Marilou Sarrut, a PHD candidate currently investigating migration in the Darién, having spent considerable time collecting field research on the ground.²¹² We will show how the CDG asserts its control over rent and profit by centralising two previously separate economies through a series of mechanisms.

2.1 From the neoliberal migration economy of Necoclí...

2.1.1 Arriving in Necoclí

Depending on the place of origin and what is most practical, most individuals begin in Medellín, Antioquía or Montería, Córdoba.²¹³ From there, migrants can take the intermunicipal bus to the town of Necoclí. Necoclí is one of the only municipalities on the Gulf of Urabá from which it is possible to cross from Antioquia to Chocó by boat and has therefore become a crucial checkpoint. Depending on migrants' available economic resources they either stay for some time in Necoclí to raise the funds to continue the journey, or purchase their tickets to cross the Gulf of Urabá from local boat companies. When the number of migrants first began to increase in the mid-2010s, the CDG had less of a stronghold on migration in Urabá. In 2016, the border between Panama and Costa Rica was closed, and tens of thousands of migrants (primarily Cubans and Haitians) found themselves blocked in Turbó, slightly further South than Necoclí in the Gulf of Urabá.²¹⁴ At the time therefore, Turbó was the main departure point for boats, but from 2019 onwards most migrant passage moved to the departure point of Necoclí. Several potential factors have been identified for this, including the construction of a new port in Turbó that risked drawing attention to growing CDG operations.

Furthermore, 2016 was the year in which the Colombian government signed a peace deal with the FARC, soon leading to conflict in Urabá between the CDG and the ELN, neither of which had been demobilised in the process. Between 2017 and 2020, the CDG and the ELN were in conflict for the Darién region, which resulted in victory for the

²¹² Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4.

²¹³ *Ibid* pg 14

²¹⁴ *Ibid* Pg 9

CDG. This, as described by ICG, resulted in the latter's "monopoly on violence on the Darién's Colombian side".²¹⁵

2.1.2 Local businesses in Necoclí

In Necoclí, migration is managed through the private sector, composed of multiple actors. Local businesses from hotels, restaurants, street vendors and transport companies all intervene and profit from the migratory phenomenon. Locally these actors are known as *chilingueros* ("chilingo" meaning migrant).²¹⁶ Some *chilingueros* operate formally through hotels, restaurants, and shops selling vital supplies for the onward journey such as food and travel equipment. Some operate informally, for example street vendors or local families and individuals renting rooms in their homes and selling meals to migrants. All *chilingueros* are taxed by the CDG. Some studies refer to a blanket rate of 10%, however in reality it is difficult from our perspective to be sure whether this rate has remained constant.²¹⁷ ²¹⁸ Either way, migration management in Necoclí is not assured by the state but by the private sector, which whether informal or not, is taxed by the CDG for its services. Although legally recognized, these companies occupy a middle ground, acting as intermediaries that profit from a lucrative economy, caught between a state that outsources responsibility, and the control of paramilitary structures.²¹⁹

Depending on the origin and wealth of migrants, navigating this highly free-market-like system may be difficult. Most Cubans, Haitians (thanks to their time in Brazil or Chile), Venezuelans and Ecuadorians can speak Spanish and therefore negotiate services on a more personal level. Migrants from Africa are often far more marginalised due to language barriers.²²⁰ Wealth also plays a large role. While some migrants can pay for accommodation, before swiftly leaving Necoclí by boat, (sometimes via quicker 'VIP' routes) others remain trapped while they gather funds. This leads to other, more predatory types of interaction with the private sector. For example, reports of

²¹⁵ International Crisis Group (2023). pg 5

²¹⁶ Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023) pg 22

²¹⁷ Darién: la frontera con alambres, migrantes pasando y el Clan controlando, (2024). [Podcast] Spotify.com. La Silla Vacía. 8 Jul. Available at: <https://www.lasillavacia.com/podcasts/huevos-revultos-con-politica/darien-lafrontera-con-alambres-migrantes-pasando-y-el-clan-controlando/> [Accessed 8 May 2025].

²¹⁸ Shuldiner, H. and Saffon, S. (2024). *Colombia's AGC Squeezes Profits From Control Of Key Migration Choke Point*. [online] InSight Crime. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/colombia-agc-squeezes-profits-control-keymigration-choke-point/>.

²¹⁹ Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023) pg 21

²²⁰ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023). Discerning networks: Distortions of human movement in Urabá, Colombia. *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean anthropology*, 29(1), pp.71–80. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12694>.

Venezuelan women being involved in the prostitution industry in order to raise funds, in brothels in Necoclí that are also managed and taxed by the CDG.²²¹ Another example includes migrants buying and selling merchandise such as rubbish bags and lighters to other migrants or cleaning the area around local businesses in exchange for boat tickets.²²²

2.1.3 State presence in Necoclí

In Necoclí, state institutions have a fairly withdrawn position. The national agency for controlling and overseeing migration and border processes is *Migración Colombia* (Colombia Migration). Initially, *Migración Colombia* did not have any physical presence in Necoclí but kept a record of migratory flow through the *chilingueros*. The two main boat companies were obliged to regularly report how many migrants had boarded boats to Chocó. In collaboration with the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being; ICBF), *Migración Colombia* operated an integrated mobile protection team, focussing primarily on child welfare.²²³ As of May 2024, a permanent office was set up in Necoclí, shared between *Migración Colombia* and ICBF, dealing with protection related issues as well as legal procedure for migrants wishing to settle in Necoclí. However as highlighted by *Migración Colombia* themselves, for most families, Necoclí is only a transit point, spending one or two weeks there before crossing the Darién.²²⁴ In terms of the police presence, according to the New York Times in 2023 :

“The top police official in the region, Col. William Zubieta, said it wasn’t his job to halt the flow. Instead, he argued, the nation’s migration authorities should be exerting control. ‘Unfortunately, they do not have it’ he said.”²²⁵

²²¹ International Crisis Group (2023). Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap. [online] www.crisisgroup.org. pg 17

²²² Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023). ‘A Ticket to Disney?’ Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.. *The New York Times*. [online] 14 Sep. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/14/world/americas/migrant-business-darien-gap.html>.

²²³ ICBF (2022). *ICBF continúa la atención a población migrante en Necoclí*. [online] ICBF. Available at: <https://www.icbf.gov.co/noticias/icbf-continua-la-atencion-poblacion-migrante-en-necocli> [Accessed 9 May 2025].

²²⁴ Migración Colombia (2024). En #Necoclí con el @icbfcolombiaoficial tenemos un punto de atención para migrantes en tránsito, con vocación de permanencia. Trabajando articulados con diversas entidades de todo el país, para atender de manera integral el fenómeno migratorio. #GobiernoDelCambio". Instagram. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/migracioncol/reel/C6KkGEktOEP/> [Accessed 9 May 2025].

²²⁵ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023). Pg 4

We thus remark a situation in which institutional actors point the finger at each other for managing the situation, in the end with no state body taking the reins. The *Defensoría del Pueblo* (Ombudsman's Office) is the national government's body for the protection of human rights. It also has a presence in Necoclí, and works primarily in coordinating with local authorities, national and international NGOs, as well as the Panamanian Ombudsman's office to promote the protection of human rights in the Darién.²²⁶ For example, in July 2024 the *Defensoría del Pueblo* called out the Panamanian government for the establishment of a barbed wire fence on the border and have consistently called for enhanced protection for migrants crossing the Darién.²²⁷

However in practice, in Colombia, when it comes to the protection of rights, municipalities are supposedly the first responders.²²⁸ Nevertheless, while the mayor's office has been implicated in the process, it has been restricted by its limited resources. For example, the municipality is responsible for the healthcare of migrants in Necoclí, meaning they must pay the hospital for individuals treated. In 2023, the ESE San Sebastián de Urabá hospital in Necoclí had treated many migrants, culminating in a collective medical bill of approximately 1000 million pesos (equivalent to around 250,000 USD).²²⁹ The hospital sued the municipality who was unable to pay, and the municipality's accounts were seized. In the end, Iván Duqué's government had to intervene to help the municipality pay off its debt. What we observe, therefore, is a national state response that promotes human rights in broad terms, while simultaneously lacking the capacity to address the issue effectively at the local level.

Another issue is not only a lack of resources but the complexity of relations between local authorities, business owners and paramilitary structures in Urabá. A Colombian researcher, who preferred to remain anonymous, at a leading Colombian think tank told us:

²²⁶ Defensoría del Pueblo Colombia (Cuenta oficial) (2024). Acciones de la Defensoría del Pueblo en el tapón del Darién. [online] YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhKHw1ggkIU> [Accessed 9 May 2025].

²²⁷ International Ombudsman Institute (2024). Defensoría de Panamá y Colombia firman carta de entendimiento sobre Derechos Humanos. [online] Theioi.org. Available at: <https://www.theioi.org/ioi/news/currentnews/defensoria-de-panama-y-colombia-firman-carta-de-entendimiento-sobre-derechos-humanos> [Accessed 9 May 2025].

²²⁸ Law 136 of 1994 established the foundational structure of municipal administration in Colombia, focusing on service provision, territorial development, and public order. Law 1551 of 2012 updated and expanded this framework by explicitly incorporating principles of human rights, citizen participation, transparency, and social inclusion, reinforcing municipalities' responsibility to guarantee the effective enjoyment of rights, especially for vulnerable populations.

²²⁹ Buitrago, D.A. (2025). Hospital de Necoclí en Urabá dice que el Ministerio de Salud le debe \$2.500 millones por atención a migrantes. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/02/19/el-hospital-de-necoclien-uraba-pide-al-ministerio-de-salud-el-pago-de-2500-millones-por-atencion-a-migrantes/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

“The armed actor is deeply embedded in society in Urabá and in other regions. We’re talking about situations where, in a single family, one person might be a boat operator, their cousin might be directly involved with the group, another might be a business owner, and yet another could work at the mayor’s office. There’s an everyday interaction that needs to be understood in those terms”²³⁰ (interview, researcher, May 2025)

The delegation of responsibilities to the municipal level in Necoclí does not directly transfer authority to the CDG. However, it can be said that the CDG capitalises on the complexity of the network of actors involved in managing migration, with targeted political or economic coercion. This is a situation that reflects long-standing dynamics in Urabá in which paramilitary structures have simultaneously contributed to and profited from alternative forms of governance. The national state’s lack of presence in Necoclí in terms of migration management is not an immediate sign of institutional failure. It is a structural feature of a region, rooted in an economic model based on development through the empowerment of non-state actors. For this reason, the state can neither be considered complicit with the CDG, nor absent from governance systems in the Darién. These understandings obscure the deeper historical entanglement of state, capital, and paramilitary interests that have long shaped the socio-economic landscape of the Darién - well before the current migratory phenomenon.

2.2. ...To the communitarian economy of Chocó

2.2.1 Arriving in Chocó

The next phase of the migration journey involves crossing the Gulf of Urabá by boat from Necoclí to the towns of Capurganá and Acandí, located in the department of Chocó. From these coastal towns, migrants begin the treacherous trek on foot through the Darién rainforest. The most common route leads from Capurganá across the Panamanian border to the Indigenous settlement of Bajo Chiquito, before continuing through Lajas Blancas and exiting the jungle at Metetí, where migrants are then transported by Panamanian authorities to the migrant camp in San Vicente.²³¹ There, they are held until purchasing a bus ticket for onward travel to the Costa Rican border. Migrants departing from Acandí often follow the same path, although that route is

²³⁰ Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote] 24 April. cf appendix 4.

²³¹ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022).

typically shorter and less hazardous, but also more expensive. Between Capurganá or Acaandí and the Panamanian border, migrants are accompanied by local “guides.” This term is preferred over “smugglers” because these individuals, often members of Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó, limit their activity to the Colombian side of the Darién, thereby never technically crossing the border.²³² However, once migrants are left at the edge of Panamanian territory, they are effectively abandoned, and from that point onward the journey becomes significantly more dangerous.

In Chocó, as in Necoclí, migration has catalysed the emergence of a local economic sector. However, the model differs notably. In Necoclí, migration services operate within a competitive, profit-driven market largely dominated by private actors and shadowed by the influence of the CDG, which extracts a portion of the profits. In contrast, in Chocó, a more communitarian economy of migration has taken root. This alternative model is characterised by collective organisation, rooted in Afro-Colombian solidarity, territorial governance, and mutual aid.²³³

2.2.2 The emergence of a migration enterprise

This community-based response began around 2016, when members of the Afro-Colombian population in Chocó started providing food, shelter, and advice to migrants crossing the Darién. These efforts were coordinated through two legally recognized community councils: the *Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Comunidad Negra de la Cuenca de los ríos Cocomá y Seco (COCMASECO)* and the *Consejo Comunitario Mayor del Norte del Río Baudó (COCMANORTE)*.²³⁴ ²³⁵ Both councils operate under Colombia’s Law 70 of 1993, which grants Afro-Colombian communities the right to collective land ownership, selfgovernance, and participation in decisions affecting their territories.²³⁶ Through these councils, communities manage local governance, defend their land rights, and address complex challenges such as armed conflict, migration, and environmental threats.

The community councils in Chocó serve as a key illustration of alternative governance structures in the Darién. Their existence reflects the historical absence of

²³² Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023)

²³³ Ibid

²³⁴ Cocomasur.org. (2023). Cocomasur – Consejo Comunitario de Comunidades Negras de la cuenca del río Tolo y zona costera Sur. [online] Available at: <https://cocomasur.org/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

²³⁵ Cocomanorte. (2024). Cocomanorte. [online] Available at: <https://cocomanorte.co/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

²³⁶ Rapoport Centre for Human Rights and Justice (n.d.). Afro-Colombian Property Rights. [online] UTexas.edu. Available at: <https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/projects/colombia/> [Accessed 13 May 2025].

formal state institutions in the region and highlights a contemporary dynamic in which their authority no longer stems solely from state absence, but rather from the delegation of authority by the state itself. In this sense, they embody a form of institutionalised autonomy that blurs the line between state and non-state governance.

As transit increased through Chocó, local communities initially provided ad-hoc, basic services, but this soon developed into a full-scale enterprise. While few reports have managed to uncover the structure of this business, in 2023 the New York Times interviewed Darwín García, a member of the community council in Acandí, and former town councilman.²³⁷ García revealed his role in the creation and management of a registered non-profit organisation called the *Fundación Social Nueva Luz del Darién* (New Light Darién Foundation). The foundation in 2023 had employed over 2000 people, providing services such as two camps in Acandí and Capurganá, guides, security, bag carriers, cooks, logistics operators, translators, drivers, nurses and psychologists. At the time, García denied any involvement with the CDG, claiming the foundation to be a non-profit and by no means linked to illicit business. At the time however, before entering the rainforest, migrants had to pay an \$80, in exchange for a sticker on their passport, widely believed to be a tax for the CDG.²³⁸

In January 2025, agents from the army, the Colombian police, the attorney general and Interpol apprehended alias *Maradona*, who is believed to have been in charge of coordinating migrant smuggling and managing drug trafficking operations for the Efrén Vargas Gutiérrez substructure of the CDG.²³⁹ It was revealed that *Maradona* was an alias for none other than Darwín García, the elected community council member and owner of the “foundation”, that in reality made profit, much of which went directly to the CDG. At the time in 2023, García’s brother Luis Fernando Martínez was the head of the local tourism association and strongly supported the migration sector for the economic benefits it brought to Acandí. Now, Martínez is the mayor of Acandí.²⁴⁰

It is therefore necessary to avoid simply proclaiming the absence of the state. Instead, the focus should be on studying which state institutions are present, how they are composed, and what role they play in contributing to a perception of institutional

²³⁷ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023)

²³⁸ Ibid

²³⁹ Blanquicet, J. (2025). *Caé alias Maradona, uno de los principales coordinadores del tráfico de migrantes en el Urabá*. [online] El Tiempo. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/delitos/cae-alias-maradona-uno-de-los-principalescoordinadores-del-trafico-de-migrantes-en-el-uraba-3418302> [Accessed 10 May 2025].

²⁴⁰ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023)

abandonment. In regions like the Darién, characterized by alternative forms of governance, ranging from private sector dominance to community council autonomy, it is crucial to avoid the error of viewing the state as a monolithic, centralised actor. Rather, it should be understood as a network of institutions operating at different scales, built on the delegation of power among various actors rather than its monopolisation. While this may be interpreted as indicative of a weak or captured state, it is essential to recognize the role of the state's embedded autonomy within a broader nexus of economic actors, which lies at the core of the development model in Colombia's peripheral regions.

2.3 The CDG and the centralisation of two economic systems

When considering the history of Urabá, and the central role of paramilitaries in assuring a development model based on free-market economics, we observe that migration through the Darién was initially managed by a series of non-state actors, operating in a nexus of informal relations. In Necoclí, this management was based on economic competition, profit and exploitation, leading to what could be described as a commodification of migrants as a resource for a series of actors in the area.²⁴¹ There was very little state intervention or *decommodification* in the sense of Polanyi, which can be explained by the alternative governance that characterises the peripheral nature of the Darién.²⁴² Within this alternative governance, the CDG profited from a highly liberalised migration economy by extracting rent, and initially, in neoliberal fashion, intervened little in the process so as to let the market develop, obtaining profit by allocating the necessary resources for market transactions. In Acandí and Capurganá in Chocó, the CDG profited from a communitarian economic system in which a natural monopoly was established by a single overarching business, with its roots in the community councils, in which paramilitaries have long been embedded. The way in which the CDG managed to monopolise control over the migratory phenomenon was by centralising these two, relatively separate local economies. This was mainly achieved through the introduction of a package system.

²⁴¹ Hernández-León, R. (2012).

²⁴² Polanyi, K. (1944).

2.3.1 The introduction of a package system

Initially, migrants arriving in Necoclí would pay for the boat ticket to Chocó, and once arriving in Chocó negotiate a price with a guide to take them to the border. However, the CDG has managed to centralise these two processes through the establishment of a package deal system. We learnt that:

“Before, the migrants had to carry a bundle of dollars in their pocket to pay - for their lunch, for being transported from one place to another, then for water, etc. In the end, that stopped happening, and instead the armed actor would charge the migrant a total amount—as if it were an all-inclusive package, where they would basically take you to the other side and provide everything.” ...”That doesn't mean, however, that these actors- like the boat operators, the hotels, or those who sell lunches - are part of the Clan, but rather that they interact within that dynamic, That's different.”²⁴³ (interview, researcher, May 2024)

Since 2022, migrants can no longer hire a guide upon arrival in Chocó, it must be pre-planned from Necoclí. To arrange this, either migrants can contact a guide through WhatsApp, or purchase a package deal including the boat to Chocó, the guide and other services from bag carrying, to prepared meals even access to humanitarian services (often sold on Facebook through “travel agencies”).²⁴⁴ To enforce this, several strategies have been tested by the CDG and its intermediaries. Between late 2022 and April 2023, a wristband system was put in place to show which migrants had pre-organised services in Chocó, even distinguishing on a colour-code basis which services they had access to such as bag carrying and security.²⁴⁵ Without a wristband, migrants could not travel. This system is no longer in place. Instead, all migrants must by a return ticket between Acandí and Chocó. Migrants arriving without having bought a package are immediately sent back to Acandí on the return trip. Those who have a pre-planned guide are allowed to continue through the Darién. The non-used return trip becomes another form of rent for the CDG.²⁴⁶

While beforehand, migrants could easily be tricked into paying very high prices by competing actors, by 2022 the prices of package deals were all generally fixed between \$200 and \$500. These prices were fixed by the CDG and imposed on travel agencies

²⁴³ Researcher at a Colombian think tank(2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote]24 April. My translation. cf appendix 3

²⁴⁴ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4.

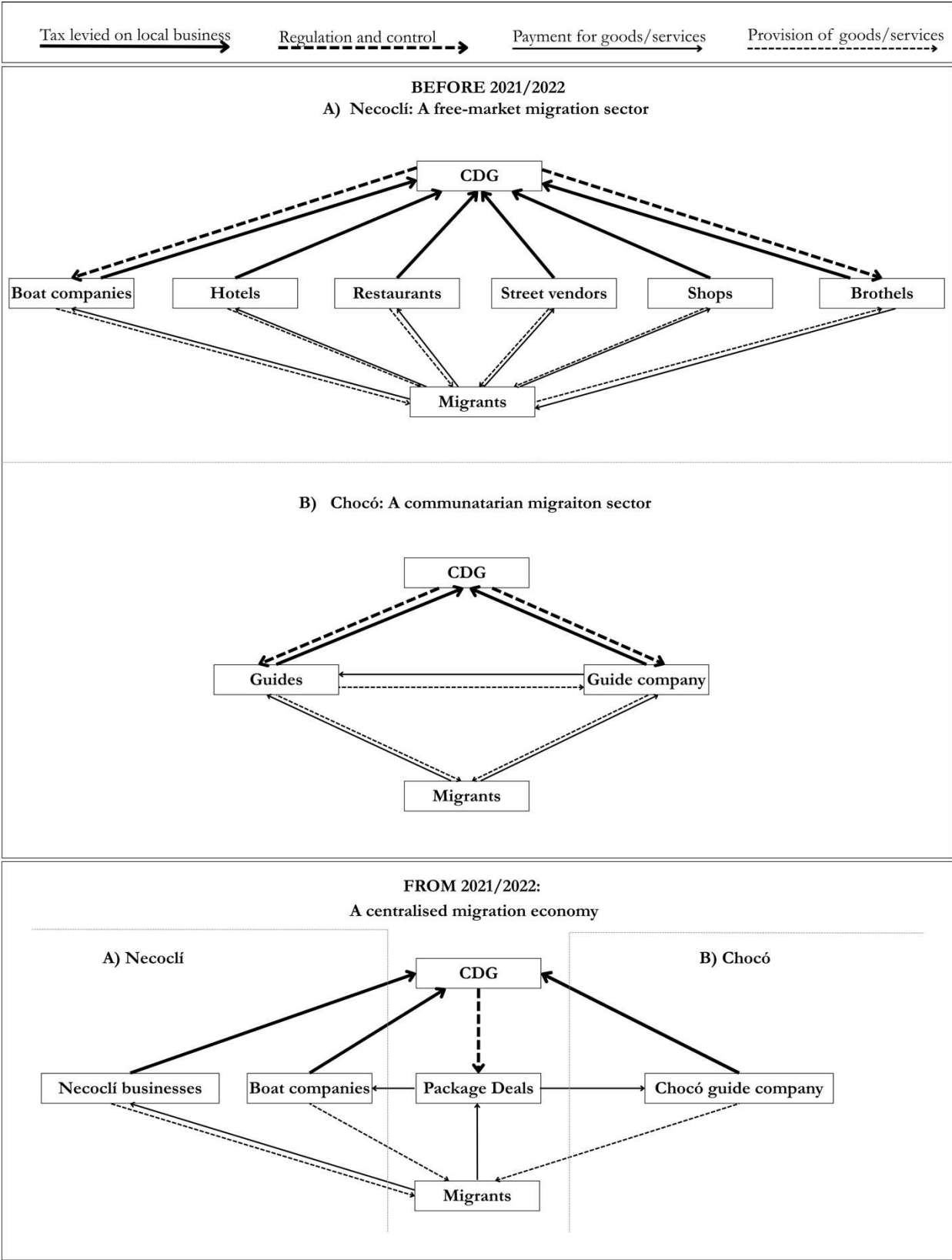
²⁴⁵ International Crisis Group (2023) pg 16

²⁴⁶ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4.

offering the package service. Any packages above \$500 were not the Capurganá and Acandí route, but instead, riskier, drug trafficking routes further north. The CDG also restricted access to most other routes and no route could be used without the CDG's authorisation. Insight Crime labels Acandí as a "chokepoint" created by the CDG to maximise its revenues through a centralised, streamlined system, giving them the monopoly over the migration economies on both sides of the Gulf of Urabá.²⁴⁷ The following diagrams in **Figure 7** (next page) represent the liberal migration economy of Necoclí, the communitarian economy of Chocó, and how the CDG centralised both to assert its control.

²⁴⁷ Shuldiner, H. and Saffon, S. (2024).

Figure 7: Centralisation through the monopoly of violence and taxation before and after 2021: the CDG asserting control over two migration economies in Necoclí and Chocó



Source: The author

The enforcement of this system has been done both through fear and economic leverage. While still in the process of establishing their command over the migration sector, the CDG used violence against guides operating outside of the CDG's model. In 2021, seven local guides were executed on the public square of Capurganá for using a route that had been temporarily closed by the CDG.²⁴⁸ The extent to which the CDG exerts a regime of fear on local populations is more accentuated in Chocó than in Acandí. Nonetheless, the CDG has established a wide network of informants monitoring all activity related to migration from local businesses, NGOs, journalists and local authorities. Since the centralisation and monopolisation of the migration sector, the CDG relies less on targeted assassinations and more on economic leverage. A guide that takes on a migrant without pre-planned arrangement won't necessarily be killed, but the migrant will already be on the return boat back to Acandí.²⁴⁹ In this case, the CDG still receives revenue from the unsuccessful attempts of migrants to cross the Darién. In centralising migratory management under their sole authority, actors involved in the process have no option but to follow their rules.

2.3.2 Political motives

Although taxing a multitude of intermediary actors in an unregulated market might appear more lucrative at first glance, the CDG's approach reflects a broader logic of territorial governance rather than mere revenue extraction. Notably, this centralisation process has not eliminated intermediaries, nor brought them entirely under the CDG's direct command. Instead, the group continues to collect funds through taxation, but within a system it now regulates through enforceable constraints on intermediaries. As highlighted in an interview with a researcher from a Colombian think tank, while the revenues from controlling migration are undoubtedly useful for financing the CDG, the group's primary motivation lies elsewhere. The regulation of migration flows serves as a tool for consolidating territorial hegemony:

“The armed group isn't primarily interested - or rather, yes, of course they're interested -in making money from this; the Clan del Golfo sees it as a significant source of income. But what matters most to the Clan is territorial control. What the armed group is really focused on is keeping

²⁴⁸ Ricardo, N. (2019). *Clan del Golfo tapon a migrantes en el Darién* | *El Colombiano*. [online] El Colombiano. Available at: https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/clan-del-golfo-tapon-a-migrantes-en-el-darienLA10238641#goog_rewarded [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁴⁹ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4.

the flow as calm as possible, so it doesn't trigger alerts from the authorities. That way, they can operate more freely in the area. This turns the armed group into something like a facilitator of movement, ensuring it happens in the most orderly and secure way possible."²⁵⁰ (interview, researcher, May 2025)

For the CDG, such large numbers of migrants crossing the Darién, framed as a crisis by local, national and international actors risked bringing unwanted attention to their drug-smuggling operations. Initially, migrant smuggling and drug smuggling were two intertwined sources of revenue and in the past, the CDG's local commanders sometimes used migrants to smuggle cocaine, or smuggled migrants along the same routes.²⁵¹ Even at the beginning of the most recent increases in transit, the CDG tolerated the passage of migrants on various routes, including those associated with drugs such as via the Pacific. However, the spike in numbers jeopardised their security. Asserting complete control over migration through the Darién became a means of directing passage away from other elements of their illicit activity. It became about managing a crisis, assuring an orderly and efficient migration regime to avoid intervention from the Colombian authorities on the routes that are also used to smuggle drugs.

Therefore, the CDG's monopolisation of the migration economy in Urabá reflects not only a logic of profit but also a form of alternative governance, in which control over mobility becomes central to asserting authority and legitimacy in a space marked by limited formal state presence. In this regard controlling migration is crucial for the ability to entrench its social influence. This can be understood through the lens of Shaw and Mangan's "protection economy" referring to the consolidation of territorial control and revenue through the provision of protection over licit and illicit flows.²⁵² By enforcing order and predictability within the migration market, the CDG reinforces its authority, disciplines local actors, and avoids triggering unwanted state attention, thus stabilising its governance role. As shown by Tobo, Cajiao and Restrepo, the rise of migration from 2018 was in fact a contributory factor for the CDG's ability to expand its control over the Darién.²⁵³ This has led to a situation in which the CDG is able to control migration by controlling intermediary actors, and control intermediary actors (representing

²⁵⁰ Researcher at a Colombian think tank(2025)*Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote]24 April. My translation. cf appendix 3.

²⁵¹ Ibid pg 23

²⁵² Shaw, M. and Mangan, F. (2015). Enforcing 'Our Law' When the State Breaks Down: The Case of Protection Economies in Libya and Their Political Consequences. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 7(1), pp.99–110. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-015-0008-4>.

²⁵³ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022). Pg 21

substantial proportions of local communities) by controlling the main sources of demand for their economic activity (migration related services).

The CDG's desire to profit from migratory movement economically and strategically has recently been put to the test in the case of reverse flow migration. Although it is too early to ascertain the CDG's precise role in this process, we managed to uncover some elements. According to our interview with a Colombian researcher:

“The hegemony of the illegal armed actor is on the Colombian side, particularly in the area of the Clan del Golfo. There, the actor (CDG) has real territorial control and a strong, even militarised, presence. In Panama, the situation is different. The Clan does not fully enter Panamanian territory. While they may have certain connections, one cannot speak of territorial control there”... “So, to sum up: it is private actors who operate the boat crossings. Separately, there is evidence that the Clan del Golfo assists migrants in entering the Darién jungle from Colombia. It is also known that the Clan facilitates the movement of migrants arriving from the Darién back into Colombia by land. But this is a smaller phenomenon compared to what happens with the boat routes.”²⁵⁴ (interview, researcher, May 2025)

This new venture of the CDG has also been alluded to by Associated Press who interviewed Elizabeth Dickinson, a senior editor at ICG. According to Dickinson, the CDG is “currently in the process of exploring the coastline to assess the how to make money from migrants travelling in the opposite direction.”²⁵⁵ We may therefore argue that the CDG has an adaptive capacity to changes in migration flows and is an opportunistic actor within a local industry of migration.

This section has traced how migration through the Darién Gap is governed by overlapping state, community, and criminal logics. In Necoclí, a commodified migration economy operates under CDG control despite a visible state presence. Across the Gulf, Afro-Colombian councils in Chocó offer community-based services, originally framed as autonomous governance but increasingly co-opted by illicit actors. The CDG has centralized control over both models, consolidating its power by blending formal and informal authority. Together, these cases reveal not a power vacuum but a system of alternative governance, where authority is fragmented, negotiated, and often enforced by paramilitary structures.

²⁵⁴ Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote] 24 April. My translation. cf appendix 3.

²⁵⁵ Janetsky, M. and Delacroix, M. (2025). *La migración impulsó un auge económico en el Tapón del Darién. Ahora, ese sustento ha desaparecido*. [online] AP News. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/migracion-tapon-darien-trumppanama-colombia-23a244c3d5914a3048d24142a0ba0c90> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

CHAPTER 3:

Migration Through the Darién as the Crystallisation of Alternative Governance

Building on the historical and contemporary analyses of the previous chapters, Chapter 3 argues that migration through the Darién crystallises the broader logics of governance operating in the region. At the heart of this governance structure is an enduring extractivist model, in which human mobility becomes a resource for overlapping state and non-state actors. The chapter examines how this dynamic is sustained by a discursive and material interdependence between the Colombian state and the CDG, exposing how state practices often reinforce, rather than oppose, illicit governance structures. Central to this analysis are the lived experiences of migrants, whose journeys through the Darién make legible the layered regimes of control that define the region. In tracing these trajectories, the chapter contends that migration not only reflects the architecture of alternative governance but also reveals its deeply human costs - namely, the production of vulnerability through systemic dehumanisation, criminalisation, and abandonment.

1. A reflection of the persistent development model based on the state's embedded autonomy

While public authorities have typically referred to the situation in the Darién as a “migration crisis”, and humanitarians have referred to it as a “humanitarian crisis” or “humanitarian emergency”, since 2021, many locals have referred to it as a “migration bonanza”.²⁵⁶ A bonanza is a temporally concentrated economic boom tied to the extraction, circulation, or control of a specific resource, whether legal or illegal, often occurring in peripheral regions and accompanied by new configurations of power and violence.²⁵⁷ Economic bonanzas have shaped the developmental model of Urabá. We identify three key elements of this term for analysing the migration bonanza in Urabá. Firstly, bonanzas are closely linked to migration, for

²⁵⁶ Hernández-Mora, S (2025). *La reportera Salud Hernández-Mora recorrió el Darién y se llevó una sorpresa: Trump y Panamá acabaron con la bonanza migratoria*. [online] Semana.com Últimas Noticias de Colombia y el Mundo. Available at: <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-reportera-salud-hernandez-mora-recorrio-el-darién-y-se-llevo-unasorpresa-trump-y-panama-acabaron-con-la-bonanza-migratoria/202517/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁵⁷ Mendoza Torres, D.A. (2023). *Migración transnacional y dinero en el municipio de Necoclí, Antioquia*. [Thesis] Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10495/40984>.

example the mass arrival of workers during the development of Chiquita Banana's operations.²⁵⁸ Secondly, bonanzas in Urabá have historically involved conflict and confrontation for the protection of an extractable economic resource.²⁵⁹ Thirdly, and most importantly, economic bonanzas in Urabá have consistently emerged in a situation of alternative governance, empowering local political and economic actors including business owners, armed groups, as well as inviting influxes of foreign capital.²⁶⁰

Therefore, bonanzas are a key notion in considering the Darién not as an empty space, but as a *space of flow*, of *confrontation* and of *alternative governance*. Bonanzas are the manifestation of a model based on the embedded autonomy of the state to bring about development through its nexus of interdependencies with alternative actors. This perspective allows us to consider the “migration bonanza”, within its wider context, to understand migration in the Darien as a transformative local development model, as well as a source of rent for the international private sector.

1.1 Migration as a transformative local development sector

The emergence of a local migration industry on both sides of the Gulf of Urabá brought significant transformations to local economies. Before the sharp increase in migration from 2021/2022, Necoclí's economy was based on tourism, boasting a 95km stretch of beached coastline.²⁶¹ However, in recent years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, migration has become the main source of revenue for the town. While in the past, most hotels only lined the beachfront, Acandí has now become one of Colombia's most dense towns in terms of the quantity of registered hotels, as locals have cleared out rooms and buildings to house migrants.²⁶² According to an interview conducted by the BBC, before the “migration bonanza” there were 86 hotels in Necoclí. As of 2025, there are around 320 (with 80 of them being informal).²⁶³ The town has witnessed a parallel process of dollarisation, due to an influx of foreign currency from

²⁵⁸ Bejarano, A.M. (1988). La violencia regional y sus protagonistas: el caso de Urabá. *Análisis Político*, [online] (4), pp.43–54. Available at: <https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/anpol/article/view/74103> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁵⁹ Mendoza Torres, D.A. (2023).

²⁶⁰ Ibid

²⁶¹ Colombia.travel. (2018). *Báñate en las Playas de Necoclí*. [online] Available at: <https://colombia.travel/fr/medellin/plages-de-necocli> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁶² Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote]24 April. My translation. cf appendix 3.

²⁶³ BBC (2025). *‘La desgracia de unos, la felicidad de otros’: Necoclí, el remoto pueblo de Colombia que prospera con la crisis migratoria en el Tapón del Darién* - BBC News Mundo. [online] BBC News Mundo. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c89vz2g5yeeo>.

nationalities all over the world, leading to price increases in most sectors. This led to a situation in which as described by NYT, “In a region so poor that horse carts still plod the streets, expensive motorcycles roar through town and \$100,000 SUVs roll alongside the sea.”²⁶⁴

In Chocó, migration also transformed the local economy. Many of the funds gathered by the migration business have been reinvested into local infrastructure including a new school, a new sewage system and new roads. According to the NYT, Las Tecas, the main camp near Acandí was a “muddy expanse” at the end of a “crude dirt path”.²⁶⁵ Through migration revenue, it was transformed into an entire village with thirty-eight shops and restaurants and a billiard hall. Two striking interviews gathered by NYT testament to this economic development in Chocó. One woman’s plantain crop was wiped out by a storm. Since becoming a bag carrier for the guide company, she earns up to \$800 dollars a month. One man lost his arm due to injury and the absence of a hospital in Acandí. He now works as a guide after struggling to find work with such a handicap.²⁶⁶ ²⁶⁷ Food vendors even travel with the guided groups, profiting from migrants’ hunger by increasing the price of their food and drink as the journey continues. As do nurses and doctors, also hired by the guide company in case of injury. These doctors often previously worked for the public hospital in Turbó but are paid far more by the company.

General support for the migration sector emerged despite the fact that a development model based on temporary crisis seems unsustainable in the long term. The local tourism secretary of Necoclí, Carlos Rajos recently argued that the benefits of the migration sector will continue to be seen despite its dramatic reduction since 2025, as the income brought to Necoclí has allowed the town to greatly reinvest in its tourism infrastructure.²⁶⁶ It remains to be seen however if the area is truly able to stimulate as much demand for services, and charge such high prices when dealing with a mainly Colombian tourist population. Support for the migration sector also emerges even though this liberalised economy of migrant services in fact marginalised some local economic actors. For example, some businesses that specifically relied on tourism, such

²⁶⁴ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023)

²⁶⁵ Ibid

²⁶⁶ Ibid

²⁶⁷ Noticias Nicaragua (2025). *Necoclí en Colombia: del tránsito migratorio al renacer turístico*. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmnIr_thOZA [Accessed 10 May 2025].

as shops selling leisure equipment from the beach, have seen drops in revenues as migration through the areas detracted tourists. Many of the economic actors involved in migration in Necoclí came specifically to the town in the aim of participating in the migration sector, relativising the positive effects on local residents.²⁶⁸ Ultimately, the migration sector is a highly competitive one that has rewarded the most adaptable, entrepreneurial actors, as well as those already in possession of capital while excluding others. The dramatic reduction in migration in 2025 exemplifies the life-cycle of bonanzas in Urabá, and their sometimes detrimental longterm effects. An AP report looked into the economic effects on the Panamanian side of the border: Referring to Lajas Blancas, a key transit point in Panama:

“The family of Zobeida Concepción, who still lives on her land, is one of only three that have not left Lajas Blancas. The 55-year-old woman explained that most of those who used to sell goods to migrants packed up and moved to Panama City in search of work. ‘When Donald Trump won, everything came to a hard stop,’ she said.” “It was once bustling with crowds navigating food stalls, SIM card vendors, blanket sellers, and charging stations for mobile phones. Today, the port and the improvised migrant camp resemble a ghost town, with faded signs advertising ‘American clothing’ in red, white, and blue.”²⁶⁹

1.2 A bonanza at the profit of the CDG

Local political support for the migration bonanza emerged despite the direct empowerment of the hegemonic armed actor, the CDG. In certain reports we find a certain degree of denial from local actors. In an interview with the aforementioned local community council member and business owner in Chocó, Darwín García, conducted by The New Humanitarian, he said, “Journalists come here looking for sensationalist gangster stories, they don’t care about the whole picture.”²⁷⁰ At the same time, we observe a hyperawareness of CDG activity that allows less implicated intermediaries to legitimise their activity, in the sense that there is always somebody more implicated with the CDG than them. In an interview with a state employee in the city of Apartadó, neighbouring Necoclí, Zuluaga and Ordóñez uncover a distinction made between the

²⁶⁸ Mendoza Torres, D.A. (2023).

²⁶⁹ Janetsky, M. and Delacroix, M. (2025). My translation

²⁷⁰ Collins, J. (2024). *Lawless and neglected: Local Colombians see Darién influx as economic lifeline*. [online] [www.thenewhumanitarian.org](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/newsfeature/2024/05/01/lawless-neglected-local-colombians-darien-migration-economic-lifeline). Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/newsfeature/2024/05/01/lawless-neglected-local-colombians-darien-migration-economic-lifeline>.

bad, criminal, community-based business in Chocó, and the good, adaptive liberal tourism sector in Acandí.²⁷¹ These two, initially separate economic networks allowed local politicians and business owners to legitimise their roles in the sector, so long as their activities remained on the Eastern side of the Gulf of Urabá. While the CDG's centralisation of operations in the two sectors from 2022 cast serious doubt on the non-involvement of local businesses in Necoclí, it simultaneously enabled actors in Chocó to present their services as part of a legitimate tourism industry on both sides of the Gulf. This shift reframed their role from one of informal community-based support to participation in a formalised economy, even as they continued to pay rent to the dominant armed group.

Local businesses are not considered, and do not consider themselves as illegal, but simply as tourist infrastructure, supported by local politicians, despite large portions of their revenue being directed towards the informal economy. As argued by Sarrut, Zuluaga and Amaya : “This economy, which involves numerous intermediaries, is neither informal nor informal and has taken shape at the centre of the ill-defined boundaries between an intermittent state presence and paramilitary control with close links to local society.”²⁷²

This dynamic is present in the migration sphere, but as this thesis shows, has long underpinned economic relations in Urabá. The implication of paramilitary structures in the local economy of migration must be understood in the context of “different economic bonanzas over the years” that “have always existed in the grey zone between legal illegal activities” whether “tropical woods, bananas, marijuana, cigarettes, liquor, cocaine or illegal arms”²⁷³ Crucially, what this reveals is the persistence of a bonanza-based economic system in Urabá that involves (i) an extractable economic resource, (ii) a multitude of profiteering private sector actors, operating within embedded forms of cooperation with institutional actors, (iii) An enforcer that acts so as to maintain its strategic position in the midst of a development model based on the state's embedded autonomy.

This model does not signify the absence of the state, but rather a strategic non-intervention that sustains specific economic arrangements. As Arias argues: “States allowed industries, foreign actors, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and

²⁷¹ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023)

²⁷² Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023) pg 20

²⁷³ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023) pg 74

religious groups to take the government's place in leading the economy and providing services to the poor and other marginalized actors."²⁷⁴ However, rather than interpreting this as a retreat of the state, we contend that it reflects a deliberate political and economic construction - where the state is embedded within the marketized process itself. In Urabá, the rationale is that direct state intervention, such as providing accommodation, food, or transport for migrants, would undermine a potentially lucrative informal market, leaving the region just as economically marginalised as before. This model rests on the belief that internal peripheries should be governed through market hegemony to foster development. From a humanitarian perspective, the state's limited role in the Darién is perceived as neglecting its obligations to the protection of human rights. Yet, at the same time, this selective "absence" is necessary to sustain an economic model believed to reduce poverty. It exemplifies a logic of embedded autonomy, where the state intervenes to safeguard strategic economic interests and withdraws when its presence might threaten them - a pattern long evident in the region, where multinationals relied on armed groups for protection, and those groups became integral to local economic relations.

1.3 The migration bonanza and multinational firms

1.3.1 The role of Western Union

When we study alternative governance in Urabá within the context of the international migration industry, we observe a deeper entanglement of state and nonstate actors in the construction and circulation of capital. The local migration economy in Urabá functions as one cog in a broader transnational machinery, where entrepreneurs, both formal and informal, profit, or for some, extract rent, at each stage of the migrant's journey. For migrants arriving from as far as Africa and Asia, the Darién Gap is neither the first nor the last point at which private actors facilitate mobility for a price. Irregular migration routes are intensely privatized and lucrative, involving a fluid mix of cooperation and competition between legal businesses, criminal enterprises, and informal networks.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Arias, E. D. (2010). Understanding Criminal Networks, Political Order, and Politics in Latin America. In: *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, pp.115-135. Pg 121

²⁷⁵ Hernandez-Leon, R. (2005)

In this landscape, international remittance firms like Western Union (WU) play a crucial but often overlooked role. In 2021, the nearest Western Union kiosk was in Apartadó, two hours south from Necoclí.²⁷⁶ Today, there are at least three WU kiosks in Necoclí allowing migrants to withdraw the funds necessary for services, including boat transfers to Chocó.²⁷⁷ In Chocó, WU agents reportedly operate directly inside the Las Tecas camp, a hub run by guide businesses, where migrants can purchase food, lodging, and equipment, services that are priced and controlled, in part, by the CDG.²⁷⁸ A portion of the payments made in Las Tecas constitutes a tax for the CDG, while another portion is absorbed as transaction fees of up to 15% by WU.²⁷⁹ This pattern repeats at other points along the route, including in Panama, where WU operates in the San Vicente camp, and is the only means of cash withdrawal to purchase the bus ticket to the Costa Rican border.²⁸⁰ This mutually reinforcing relationship between a transnational financial firm and a paramilitary structure illustrates a dual form of economic relations: one of rent extraction by an armed actor, the other of profit by a global cooperate actor (considering the transaction fee as the price of a service for each individual). However, as both are mutually reinforcing, as the CDG also provides protection services (see 3.2.1) and as WU applies extremely high transaction fees, the frontiers between rent and profit in the economy of migration are blurry.

1.3.2 Social media platforms and migratory movement

Aside from WU, another key international economic sector involved in migratory movement are social media companies. One of the main facilitators of mobility through the Darién today are digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. It is most typically through Facebook that migrants can access and purchase packages offering passage to the border. This content is also highly profitable to social media companies. As uncovered by Turkewitz, on TikTok, Spanish-language hashtags such as #migracion and #darien have each amassed nearly two billion views, sometimes

²⁷⁶ Mendoza Torres, D.A. (2023).

²⁷⁷ Wise. (n.d.). *Currency exchanges in Necoclí*. [online] Available at: <https://wise.com/gb/currency-exchange/necocli> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁷⁸ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023)

²⁷⁹ Ibid

²⁸⁰ Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023)

appearing alongside ads for global brands like H&M and Apple.²⁸¹ This convergence of a humanitarian emergency and monetised digital attention underscores the migration bonanza is integrated into a wider model, described by Srnicek as “platform capitalism”²⁸² **Figure 8** shows a Facebook advert uncovered by NYT, offering a package deal:²⁸³

Figure 8: Facebook advert for a package deal



Translation: “What does it include? Food, accommodation, boat ticket, guide, **tax** (to the CDG), wristband, transport, emergency and medical services, complete logbook from the UN in Panama to Tapachula, Mexico, Guidance from departure point to the U.S. at no additional cost. Your security is our greatest responsibility. Avoid scams”

Nevertheless, while digital firms can be considered as profiteering from dangerous migration routes, they have also become an essential means of guidance, and of solidarity between migrants in the Darién.^{284 285} Venezuelan migrant, Manuel Monterrosa crossed

²⁸¹ Turkewitz, J. (2023). Live from the Jungle: Migrants Become Influencers on Social Media. *The New York Times*. [online] 20 Dec. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/20/world/americas/migrants-tiktok-dariengap.html>.

²⁸² Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

²⁸³ Turkewitz, J. (2023)

²⁸⁴ Fernández, A., Martín, A. and Carlos, J. (2024). Crossing the Darien With TikTok. In: *Digital Culture and the U.S.-Mexico Border Rhetorics on Human Mobility*. [online] London: Routledge, pp.60–75. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003519263-6>.

²⁸⁵ UNHCR (2023). *Darien Panama: Mixed Movements Protection Monitoring October 2023*. [online] UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP). Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/104236> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

the Darién in 2022, and filmed his journey, including advice to other migrants looking to make the crossing. After making it to the U.S., Monterrosa published his videos, which became so popular that he now makes a living of up to \$1,000 dollars a month from his YouTube channel. He has since made it his economic activity to cross the Darién several times, as well as other dangerous migration routes and told the NYT “Migration sells”... “my public is a public that wants a dream”.²⁸⁶ In October 2023, UNHCR revealed that out of those surveyed, 35% used TikTok for information about the journey and 29% used Facebook.²⁸⁷ The Darién is not only a *space of flow* of resources and human beings but also of information, on a global level. We can therefore ascertain that the forms of alternative governance that the migration bonanza have revealed involve local actors, international capital, but in many cases a blurring of the two and an interdependency between the needs of migrants in the Darién and the ventures of actors seeking to profit from them.

The migration bonanza in the Darién is not a rupture but a reflection, one that lays bare the enduring logics of development, governance, and violence that have historically shaped the region of Urabá. This model of governance, rooted in the state’s embedded autonomy, shows how its strategic non-intervention enables both state and nonstate actors to profit from migration. Local businesses, the CDG, global firms such as WU and digital platforms converge to create a complex economy that thrives on the commodification of human movement. Far from an empty space, the Darién is a highly structured region where crisis becomes opportunity, and governance takes alternative, fragmented forms that reflect the region’s deep entanglement with both local and global forces.

2. Alternative governance of migration analysed through justificative discourse

A key tension raised by this co-constructed migration sector is to what extent this eclipses a humanitarian emergency, and through which political narratives the non-intervention of the state in certain sectors (health, accommodation) is being justified. We contend that the study of migration in the Darién also unveils a discursive interdependency between the state and the CDG’s discourses surrounding the protection of migrants’ rights. Essentially, the CDG is able to position itself as a

²⁸⁶ Turkewitz, J. (2023)

²⁸⁷ YouTube. (n.d.). *Manuel Monterrosa*. [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgWNwPZco_H-3v5Z10ip3iQ [Accessed 14 May 2025].

humanitarian actor and a security provider in absence of state presence, while the state emphasises the global forces of periphery-centre relations that reduce Colombia's humanitarian responsibility, thus creating the space for the informal local governance of migration. This shapes the current form of alternative governance and for now, protects the regional economic model in place.

2.1 CDG discourse: Criminal group or security providers?

2.1.1 The CDG as security providers

The CDG's involvement ends at the Colombia-Panama border. Beyond this point, migrants face extreme danger from Panamanian criminal gangs responsible for widespread violence.²⁸⁸ In contrast, on the Colombian side, up to the border, migrants who have paid are guided, cared for, and protected. Even in Acandí, before reaching Chocó, the CDG enforces curfews and bans dangerous night crossings to prevent harm. Since December 2024, migrants have been banned from the beaches of Necoclí.²⁸⁹ This securitisation of migration limits perceptions of disorder within Colombia and allows the CDG to present itself as a "humanitarian" actor. NGOs seeking access along the Darién route negotiate with the CDG rather than state authorities.²⁹⁰ The CDG thus monopolizes both the local migration and moral economies, fostering the perception that without their management, the Colombian Darién would be as dangerous as Panama's. Their services are seen as essential for survival. The CDG's official website, *El Gaitanista*, provides key insight. In a September 2023 statement, they claim:

"The obvious **humanitarian implications** of this massive migration of people of various nationalities through this inhospitable territory are deeply troubling. In this context, the AGC (CDG) wish to make it clear that they **neither participate in nor benefit** from the business that trades in the hopes of migrants seeking a better future for themselves and their families, nor are they responsible for transporting them. What they do aim for, **given that the Darién is an area under their influence, is to minimize the suffering of those in transit** and ensure that those responsible for transporting migrants - who are not and do not belong to the AGC - respect their rights. The AGC acknowledge the seriousness of this transnational migratory phenomenon and **seek to alleviate this massive tragedy in the Darién region**. This statement underscores the

²⁸⁸ Ragozzino, M.R. (2024).

²⁸⁹ Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote] 24 April. cf appendix 3.

²⁹⁰ Sarrut, M (2025). *Interview with author* [remote] 11 March. cf appendix 2.

importance of addressing the migration crisis with a humanitarian approach and respect for human rights, and of involving all relevant stakeholders in the search for effective solutions.”²⁹¹ (emphasis added)

Through this, the CDG portrays itself not as a criminal group, aiming to increase its economic and political control, but as a humanitarian protector and the only effective actor locally. It delegitimises the state while also denying its own involvement. In this sense the false perception of an empty, ungoverned space is also instrumentalised by the CDG who uses this to detract from their illicit role in migratory governance.

2.1.2 A discourse that serves a wider political narrative

The CDG’s “service-providing” discourse extends beyond migration management, intertwining with its broader political project. A propaganda video introducing CDG Commander Javier states:

“In the depths of forgotten Colombia, where the echo of injustice rings in every corner, and state abandonment leaves indelible scars, an almost mythical figure emerges: Commander Javier. For many, a warrior, for others a tireless protector, but for everybody a symbol of hope. In the shadows of inequality, Javier has raised his banner, demonstrating that even in desolate territories, the fight for dignity and justice can flourish.”²⁹²

The CDG uses the argument of Colombia’s uneven territorial decommodification to promote an alternative governance model in the Darién. This model combines economic and social control, wielding fear while mimicking state institutions. According to ICG, the CDG expanded its presence from 213 to 392 municipalities between 2019 and 2023 through inherited guerrilla and paramilitary strategies.²⁹³ In the first phase, “moving in,” the CDG offers jobs, supports infrastructure, gifts children, and distributes food. A social leader told ICG:

²⁹¹ El Gaitanista (2025). *Las AGC Emiten Comunicado sobre la Crisis Migratoria en Colombia y el Darién*. [online] Elgaitanista.org. Available at: <https://www.elgaitanista.org/noticias/las-agc-emiten-comunicado-sobre-la-crisismigratoria-en-colombia-y-el-darien> [Accessed 11 May 2025]. My translation

²⁹² Comandante Javier. (n.d.). *El Gaitanista*. Available at: <https://www.elgaitanista.org/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

²⁹³ International Crisis Group (2024). *The Unsolved Crime in ‘Total Peace’: Dealing with Colombia’s Gaitanistas* | *Crisis Group*. [online] www.crisisgroup.org. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-american/caribbean/andes/colombia/105-unsolved-crime-total-peace-dealing-colombias-gaitanistas>.

“They don’t arrive like assassins, but instead they are offering to help, to fix, to give. To the point that the people say, ‘the state does not have a presence here, but the groups do, doing everything that a state should be doing.’”²⁹⁴

This superficial benevolence masks constant threat. In the second phase, “sinking roots,” the CDG builds local intelligence networks, often recruiting children as informants, and forms alliances with political structures like community councils and social leaders. Rather than replacing the state, the CDG strives from the forms of alternative governance that exist in Colombia’s peripheral areas. The CDG embeds itself within existing governance forms, negotiating with local political and economic actors.²⁹⁵ The final phase, “consolidating control,” sees the CDG exercise quasi-judicial power through local *puntos* that resolve disputes with rulings involving fines or community service. Even elected officials and Indigenous authorities coordinate with the group.²⁹⁶ The CDG also dominates civil society by infiltrating, co-opting, or replacing independent organizations. Community leaders must inform the CDG of meetings, which are monitored, and those seen as uncooperative risk threats or violence. At the same time, CDG-supported groups gain influence by distributing aid and organizing public events, functions that independent actors can no longer carry out without their permission. In some regions, even government agencies have been forced to halt projects due to pressure from the group.²⁹⁷

Thus, the CDG does not simply occupy a stateless void - it actively takes over and embeds itself in local institutions, blurring the line between state and paramilitary governance. This dynamic is key to understanding their migration discourse: the CDG positions itself as guarantor of rights the state fails to secure and as provider of jobs in historically neglected peripheral areas. These regions have long seen alternative governance rooted in state embedded autonomy within complex networks of non-state economic actors and violent contractors protecting capital extraction. Economic and military control alone is insufficient for the CDG. It must also produce a political discourse positioning itself as the most credible alternative to state and other non-state actors. Their humanitarian rhetoric around migration exemplifies a broader strategy of

²⁹⁴ Ibid pg 26

²⁹⁵ Ibid

²⁹⁶ Ibid

²⁹⁷ Ibid

defining their alternative governance role, not merely justifying and protecting their economic interests.

2.2 National state discourse

To understand the Colombian state's recent stance on migration through the Darién, this section examines the administrations of Iván Duque (2018-2022) and Gustavo Petro (from 2022), the country's first left-wing president.²⁹⁸ The shift from Duque to Petro marks a significant political and policy transformation. Duque, aligned with Álvaro Uribe's legacy, promoted a conservative, neoliberal agenda focused on militarization, free markets, and private property, maintaining a hard-line security approach and rejecting aspects of the 2016 peace accord.²⁹⁹ In contrast, Petro has prioritized social justice, environmental sustainability, and peace implementation, advocating for reduced fossil fuel dependence, expanded social programs, and greater economic equity.

This ideological shift is key to understanding how state discourse on the Darién has evolved since 2022. Petro's presidency coincides with record migration levels and a move away from the securitized, market-friendly lens of his predecessor. As this thesis argues, the migration economy in the Darién is shaped by both paramilitary control and global migration markets. The region is thus central to analysing the state's embedded autonomy and its ability to coexist with and potentially challenge criminal and market forces. Migration through the Darién provides a concrete case for assessing whether Petro's agenda has led to meaningful changes in peripheral governance (at least at the discursive level).

2.2.1 Duque 2018 – 2022: Not a Colombian problem

During Iván Duque's presidency (2018–2022), Colombia was positioned primarily as a transit country in global migration routes, and the Darién Gap was framed accordingly as a region of passage, not of responsibility. While Duque's administration was internationally praised for its humanitarian response to the Venezuelan migration

²⁹⁸ Delcas, M. (2022). Colombia: Historic win for Gustavo Petro, the country's first left-wing president. *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 20 Jun. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/20/colombia-historic-win-for-gustavo-petro-the-country-s-left-wing-president_5987458_4.html.

²⁹⁹ Díaz Pabón, F.A. (2022). *Colombians have voted for change | D+C - Development + Cooperation*. [online] Dandc.eu. Available at: <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/symbolism-and-challenges-election-victory-gustavo-petro-andhis-running-mate-francia> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

crisis - particularly through the temporary protected status granted to 1.8 million Venezuelans - the Darién rarely featured in official discourse.³⁰⁰ In a 2021 interview with *PBS NewsHour* in Washington, Duqué was asked about U.S. externalisation policy and its potential role in managing migration through the region. His response centred on economic opportunity:

“Colombia is embracing right now a very strong fraternal migration policy. As you know, we are granting temporary protective status to 1.8 million Venezuelan brothers and sisters who are in our country. And now you were mentioning the situation in the U.S. Southern border. I think the approach that has been taken by the United States in order to promote near-shoring, which means let's bring U.S. factories that were deployed in Asia also to be installed in Latin America, be close to market, I think that can generate a lot of opportunities and job opportunities, especially in Central America and in countries like Colombia.”³⁰¹

This reflects a market-based approach: the migration “problem” could be solved not through increased protection or regulation, but by encouraging U.S. capital to generate industrial jobs in Colombia.³⁰² This logic mirrors long-standing neoliberal frameworks, generally visible in Urabá, where state governance is reduced to facilitating the movement of capital and labour, with little consideration of the human implications. When asked directly about Colombia’s obligations toward migrants traversing the Darién, Duqué responded:

“This is a situation that we have seen for many years. And Colombia has made interventions in the Darién Gap. We have regular controls with Panama. But... what has happened in Haiti... is putting more pressure on people to migrate... I think that’s why we need to have a more coordinated migration policy.”³⁰³

Here, Duqué again situates migration within a broader international political economy. The causes of displacement are external, and solutions lie in development aid and foreign investment. The Colombian state is largely absent from the narrative - not

³⁰⁰ European Commission (2022). *Love in the time of the Venezuelan migration crisis*. [online] European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Available at: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/newsstories/stories/love-time-venezuelan-migration-crisis_en [Accessed 14 May 2025].

³⁰¹ PBS (2021). *Colombia’s President Duqué on environmental terrorism, migration and democracy*. [online] PBS News. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/colombias-president-duque-on-environmental-terrorismmigration-and-democracy> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

³⁰² Felipe Larraín, B. and Carmen Cifuentes, V. (2024). *Nearshoring in Latin America: Who Could Benefit Most?* [online] Americas Quarterly. Available at: <https://americasquarterly.org/article/nearshoring-in-latin-america-who-couldbenefit-most/>.

³⁰³ Ibid

as an agent of protection or governance, but as a passive transit corridor. There is no mention of humanitarian assistance in the Darién or the role of armed actors in regulating mobility. Migration, in this framing, is not a national concern but a hemispheric inevitability.

2.2.2 Gustavo Petro from 2022: A discursive shift

The 2022 election of Gustavo Petro - Colombia's first left-wing president - marked a break with decades of neoliberal governance. His reform agenda has aimed to strengthen state autonomy, promote environmental sustainability, reduce inequality, and complete the unfinished peace process initiated in 2016. While his government has faced institutional limitations, including a fragmented Congress, Petro's discourse signals a clear shift from the securitised and market-oriented approach of his predecessor.³⁰⁴

Petro's presidency coincided with record levels of migration through the Darién Gap and renewed international attention to the crisis. Unlike Duqué, Petro has explicitly linked the region's humanitarian emergency to the Colombian state's historic absence and the power of predatory non-state actors. In a 2023 interview with *The New York Times*, Petro admitted that the Colombian government had limited control over the Darién, but resisted calls for militarised enforcement:

“Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, acknowledged in an interview that the national government had little control over the region, but added that it was not his goal to stop migration through the Darién anyway - despite the agreement his government signed with the United States. After all, he argued, the roots of this migration were “the product of poorly taken measures against Latin American peoples,” particularly by the United States, pointing to Washington's sanctions against Venezuela. He said he had no intention of sending “horses and whips” to the border to solve a problem that wasn't of his country's making.”³⁰⁵

This illustrates a discursive break from securitisation towards a critique of structural injustice. Petro distances his government from U.S.-led enforcement models and instead emphasises root causes. However, despite this rhetorical shift, Petro also reproduces the notion that the Darién is an externalised problem, caused by foreign policy missteps and only indirectly Colombia's concern. Unlike Duqué, however, Petro has acknowledged

³⁰⁴ Justice for Colombia (2024). *The Petro government's social reforms: what is their current status? - justice for colombia*. [online] justice for colombia. Available at: <https://justiceforcolombia.org/news/the-petro-governments-social-reformsupdate-on-their-current-status/>.

³⁰⁵ Turkewitz, J. and Rios, F. (2023)

that the state's non-interventionist role in regional informal markets exacerbates the humanitarian crisis. In a 2022 interview, he remarked: "Our role is to assist, in a geographic zone that, as we know, is extremely difficult", adding the necessity to establish a "state presence that facilitates assistance to people taking death road".³⁰⁶

Despite this call for presence, the state's actual reach in the Darién remains limited. Where it does operate, it often coexists with or defers to non-state actors. Petro's recognition of the CDG's role in migration management - implicitly and sometimes explicitly- has shaped his broader strategy to extend state control through negotiation, rather than confrontation.

Central to this strategy is Petro's government's "Total Peace" agenda, launched in 2022.³⁰⁷ The policy seeks to complete the 2016 peace accords by integrating not only FARC dissident factions and leftist insurgencies like the ELN, but also paramilitary and criminal groups. In regions such as Urabá, where the FARC's demobilisation left a power vacuum, the CDG quickly became the dominant actor - controlling mobility, territory, and informal economies. While Petro has initiated negotiations with the ELN and some FARC factions, efforts to engage the CDG have so far failed. The CDG, which economically benefits from alternative governance, has little incentive to enter peace talks, and actively seek to sabotage peace talks between the government and other armed groups. Between 15 and 27 April 2025, the group assassinated 27 police officers and soldiers - an open act of defiance that severely undermined the state's negotiating position.³⁰⁸

Despite these setbacks, Petro has explored alternative solutions. In September 2024, after meeting Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino at the United Nations, Petro proposed the creation of a state-managed legal migration corridor:

"It must include incentives so that those who want to cross choose that route and don't fall into the hands of the mafias. I think that's an idea we can continue to develop... We want to open a calm, effective route, controlled by the public authorities of both countries. And that would lead

³⁰⁶ InfoBae (2022). *Gustavo Petro pidió presencia estatal para asistir a los migrantes en el Darién*. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2022/09/29/gustavo-petro-pidio-presencia-estatal-para-asistir-a-los-migrantes-en-el-darien/> [Accessed 11 May 2025]. My translation

³⁰⁷ Breda, T. (2024). *'Total Peace' paradox in Colombia: Petro's policy reduced violence, but armed groups grew stronger*. [online] ACLED. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/2024/11/28/total-peace-paradox-in-colombia-petros-policy-reduced-violence-but-armed-groups-grew-stronger/>.

³⁰⁸ BBC News (2025). *'Plan pistola': el rebrote de violencia en Colombia que deja decenas de policías y militares asesinados y que recuerda a la estrategia de terror de Pablo Escobar - BBC News Mundo*. [online] BBC News Mundo. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articulos/c1ege7n4nwp0>.

people to stop submitting themselves to these types of groups and, let's say, have a better life in the decisions they've made,"³⁰⁹

This proposal recognises the structural relationship between illegality and the absence of legal alternatives. However, it faces numerous challenges. First, the U.S.–Panama axis has increasingly focused on border securitisation, making it unlikely that Washington would endorse a humanitarian corridor. Second, logistical and financial hurdles persist. Petro's earlier proposal to build a transoceanic railway across the Darién has proven costly, environmentally fraught, and geographically unviable. Though he promised a local referendum in Chocó, it has yet to take place.³¹⁰

While Petro's discourse marks a clear departure from Duqué's market-based framing, the structural realities of the Darién remain largely unchanged. Migration reached record levels under Petro, with minimal state protection. The CDG has grown richer, more violent, and more entrenched. On one hand, the CDG justifies its role by filling a governance void the state has long neglected. On the other, the state justifies its absence by framing migration through the Darién as a problem rooted in global dynamics beyond its control. This discursive interdependency underpins alternative governance in the Darién. It reinforces economic interdependencies between state and non-state actors. It displaces responsibility for maintaining migration upwards to international forces, and laterally to local alternative actors.

2.3 Interests speak louder than words

Since Petro's arrival, political discourse on the Darién has radically shifted, yet institutional involvement on the ground seems to remain largely unchanged. To understand this paradox, we must move beyond discourse and examine the specific interests of the actors managing migration in the region. In the Darién, the boundaries between legal and illegal, formal and informal, political and criminal actors often blur. The migration economy offers insight into how these

³⁰⁹ Presidencia Colombia (2025). *Colombia y Panamá evalúan ruta para legalizar paso de migrantes por el Darién: presidente Petro*. [online] Presidencia.gov.co. Available at: <https://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Colombia-yPanama-evaluan-ruta-para-legalizar-paso-de-migrantes-por-el-Darien-presidente-Petro-240925.aspx> [Accessed 11 May 2025]. My translation

³¹⁰ Saavedra, F. (2024). *Petro insistió en su proyecto de un tren transoceánico y propuso hacer una consulta en el Chocó*. [online] infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2024/07/05/presidente-petro-propone-consultapopular-sobre-construccion-de-tren-transoceanico-para-generar-recursos-en-el-choco/> [Accessed 11 May 2025].

relationships are negotiated and how alternative forms of governance are redrawn to reflect the interests of those involved. As we were told by Marilou Sarrut,

“What’s interesting to study is which actors get involved, at which point in the Darién. Which actors get involved in relation to their local, national or international interest. And actually, migrants are simply caught within these interests”³¹¹ (interview, M. Sarrut, April 2024)

Rather than revealing a fixed governance structure, migration in the Darién highlights the need to analyse actors’ interests rather than just their capacities. State agencies’ relative inaction, often seen as a lack of capacity, must also be read in terms of political and economic incentives. As for the CDG’s role in migration management, it stems not only from its capabilities but from its strategic interest in territorial control and revenue. Similarly, neighbouring states’ responses, from Panama or the U.S., are shaped more by political will than logistical limits. The reverse flow of migrants, facilitated by Panama’s incursions into Colombian territory, underscores that action is possible when aligned with economic (e.g. bilateral deals with the U.S. involving financial aid packages) and political interests (e.g. domestic electoral concerns). In this context, governance in the Darién is best understood as a fluid and contested process, shaped by shifting alignments of interest among state and non-state actors, producing cycles of negotiation, conflict, and temporary order. The following table illustrates a brief comparison of the political and economic interests, outlined thus far in this thesis, of the actors involved in the governance of migration through the Darién. It shows that the CDG has both political and economic interests in asserting its presence in the Darién, and controlling migratory flows. On the other hand, Colombian, Panamanian and US authorities may have either an economic or political interest in intervening in the migratory process, but not both. In the table, the green colour represents a reason for interest, and the red highlights a relative disinterest, either politically or economically.

³¹¹ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4.

Figure 9: Table of political/economic interests influencing the governance of migration

	Political Interests	Economic Interests
Colombian state	The protection of human rights, the perception of institutional territorial control.	The peripheral Darién remains subject to a development model that relies on a <i>laissez-faire</i> state. The migration economy is reliant on little state intervention.
Panama	Regulating migration on their territory and limiting illicit Smuggling.	A more restrictive policy is in Panama’s interests in the context of its financially incentivised border deal with the USA.
USA	Little political interest for the Trump administration to have a welcoming migration policy. ³¹²	Despite the economic benefits of migration to developed countries such as the USA. ³¹³
CDG	Territorial and social control, the empowerment of a service providing political discourse and a vector for expanding their reach in civil society.	The taxation of a highly profitable migration economy in the Darién, as well as the protection of their other economic interests in the region.

This allows us to understand how alternative governance in the Darién, rather than imposing specific roles on given actors, on the contrary gives local, national and international stakeholders the autonomy to act in accordance with their political and economic interests. The CDG’s role in migration management stems not only from its role as the most capable service provider, but from its most strong interest in doing so. This autonomy is historically embedded in the socio-economic relations of Urabá.

³¹² Thulin, L. (2025). *How Trump’s immigration policies compare to those of America’s past* - Berkeley News. [online] Berkeley News. Available at: <https://news.berkeley.edu/2025/03/04/how-trumps-immigration-policies-compare-tothose-of-americas-past/>.

³¹³ Congress.gov. (2016). *The Effects of Immigration on the United States’ Economy*. [online] Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/116727/documents/HHRG-118-JU01-20240111-SD013.pdf> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

3. The product of the alternative governance of migration: Systemic dehumanisation

So far, this chapter has shown how the case of migration illuminates persistent economic dynamics based on embedded autonomy in the Darién. It has also shown how the role of the different actors involved is held together by a form of discursive interdependency between actors in the alternative governance nexus. The final section of this chapter, and this thesis shows how the case of migration allows us to consider the perverse effects of this alternative governance on the most vulnerable. This section studies firstly how the commodification of migration as a resource dehumanises a humanitarian emergency, and secondly how the criminalisation of intermediaries and migrants themselves aggravates the humanitarian situation.

3.1 The impacts of commodification

3.1.1 The commodification of the migratory experience

A central challenge in applying a political economy framework to migration in the Darién is avoiding the reduction of migrants to mere resources within systems of extraction and control. Migrants are active agents navigating a complex and dynamic field of power shaped by multiple actors, including themselves.³¹⁴ Understanding alternative governance in the Darién requires recognizing this fluidity rather than assuming a fixed structure. This recognition does not prevent analysis of the actors allowing for the commodification of migration. As this thesis has discussed, commodification permeates the migration regime. The CDG extracts rent at every stage by charging for essentials (food, shelter, transport, and protection) while exploiting the manufactured image of the Darién as a perilous and violent terrain. This constructed danger inflates costs, forcing migrants to gamble with their survival. The higher the perceived risk, the more the CDG benefits.

Michael Sandel's critique of market logic is particularly relevant here. When markets penetrate spheres traditionally governed by moral and social norms, such as health, education, or in this case, human survival, they fundamentally alter the nature of those spheres.³¹⁵ In the Darién, the commodification of safety, dignity, and freedom of

³¹⁴ Clunan, A.L. and Trinkhaus, H.A. (2010)

³¹⁵ Sandel, M.J. (2012). *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. New York: Penguin Books.

movement transforms survival into a transaction, eroding the humanitarian claims of migrants. This extractivist economic model echoes wider patterns of peripheral resource exploitation in the global political economy. However, we must be careful not to dehumanise migrants by focusing solely on structural or economic dimensions. Ignoring migrants' lived experiences and agency risks reinforcing the very commodification Sandel warns against - valuing human life by its market price rather than inherent dignity. This tension between systemic exploitation and individual autonomy sets the stage for a deeper investigation of how agency is negotiated on the ground, especially where state presence is fragmented or contested.

3.1.2 The essential consideration of migrants' agency

Marilou Sarrut highlighted the significant autonomy of many migrants crossing the Darién in Colombia, challenging dominant portrayals of migrants as passive victims under Clan del CDG control. She contrasts conditions in Colombia with those in Panama: "Migrants go to restaurants, they drink beers at the beach, they're relatively free. It's in Panama that they are less free because there is control."³¹⁶

This distinction problematises simplistic assumptions about state authority and control. In Panama, the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force manifests through confinement and restrictions in official camps. Conversely, in Colombia, the informal governance structures allow migrants (at least those with the financial resources) greater mobility and freedom of movement. This relative freedom reveals a crucial aspect of alternative governance in the Darién. Rather than a power vacuum merely occupied by criminal groups, the region is a historically constructed space where multiple actors, including the state, negotiate control. The Colombian state has often tolerated or even integrated non-state actors into broader security and development strategies, resulting in a shared and fluid governance over territory and populations. Migrants, therefore, are not simply commodified by groups like the CDG; they actively navigate, resist, and influence these complex governance arrangements.

Urabá's long history of displacement, impacting Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities as well as victims of armed conflict, has frequently framed mobile populations as passive victims, of violence or of economic forces. As argued by Zuluaga and Ordóñez, "Travellers thus become inscribed into local logics brought on by decades

³¹⁶ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4. My translation

of violence, infrastructural development, and internal colonization.”³¹⁷ In this regard, The recurrent framing of migration in Urabá as linked to paramilitary structures serves the state’s interest in securitizing what is essentially a humanitarian issue. The authors add that “Acknowledging the autonomy of travellers would somewhat change the political narrative about Urabá and require another system (e.g., neighbours like Panama with infrastructures for humanitarian intervention) that the government seems uninterested in pursuing.”³¹⁸ ³¹⁹ This reduction of migrant agency through commodification facilitates their criminalisation, treating them not as rights-bearing subjects but as illicit goods flowing through a transcontinental space of flow, governed more by logics of security, control, and profit than by humanitarian principles.

3.2 The co-construction of criminality

3.2.1 Criminalisation of the migration industry

The commodification of migrant lives is driven by actors who extract rent from their passage but is also enabled by a regional context where the state has historically empowered extractivism. Similarly, the criminalisation of migration is a co-constructed process involving states, which define the boundaries of legality, and intermediaries and migrants who operate beyond these limits. The more that states define the illicit, the smaller the licit space becomes, the more the ‘illicit’ actors of alternative governance emerge.³²⁰ In Colombia, this dynamic mirrors debates around cocaine. President Petro recently argued that the cocaine trade fuels conflict and called for its legalisation and state regulation as a path to peace.³²¹ Applying this lens to the Darién, the illicit migration sector can be seen as a consequence of the state’s focus on the CDG’s activity over migrant lives, which has led to the criminalisation and diminishing agency of intermediaries in the migration economy. Marilou Sarrut explained to us how:

³¹⁷ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023) pg 78

³¹⁸ Ibid pg 78

³¹⁹ *Here the humanitarian infrastructure in question is in reference to the multiple reception centres outside of the Panamanian Darién. The inner rainforest in Panama remains the most dangerous area, with the least state or humanitarian presence.*

³²⁰ Felbab-Brown, V. (2010). *Rules and Regulations in Ungoverned Spaces: Illicit Economies, Criminals and Belligerents*. [online] Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rules-and-regulations-in-ungoverned-spaces-illiciteconomies-criminals-and-belligerents/> [Accessed 15 May 2025].

³²¹ Csongor Körömi (2025). *Colombia’s president: Legalize cocaine, it’s no worse than whiskey*. [online] POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/colombia-president-gustavo-petro-legalize-cocaine-no-worse-thanwhiskey-latin-america/>.

“Local actors, because the CDG is there, on an international level, become an illicit sector. Despite that for five or six years it was an informal sector, it was a case of local involvement because the state wasn’t there, and because of scarce economic resources. When the CDG arrived it immediately became seen as international migrant trafficking, transnational crime, run by drug dealers.”³²² (interview, M. Sarrut, April 2024)

This shift in the legal and political framing of intermediaries is shaped by national and international legal regimes. However, from an academic perspective, there is also a risk in treating all intermediaries as part of the CDG’s personnel. Our analysis shows this is neither always true nor always false. This broad criminalisation, which frames migration solely as an illicit resource controlled by the CDG, obscures the agency and complexity of intermediaries. Zuluaga and Ordóñez highlight that intermediaries often justify their services as legitimate tourism-related businesses or acts of benevolence. Yet, from the state’s perspective, these same actors are complicit in irregular border crossings and people smuggling.³²³ This tension can be explored through Achilli’s concept of the “‘good’ smuggler,” which unpacks the moral economy of intermediating irregular migration.³²⁴

3.2.2 Intermediaries and ‘good smugglers’

Luigi Achilli’s concept of the “good smuggler” offers a crucial perspective for understanding actors who facilitate irregular migration. Contrary to dominant portrayals of smugglers as uniformly immoral, violent, and profit-driven, Achilli highlights that many operate within complex socio-economic and moral frameworks. These facilitators often maintain nuanced, situational relationships with migrants, shaped by empathy, reciprocity, or community ties. His work challenges criminalising all migration facilitators, advocating for analyses rooted in local realities rather than security-driven external narratives.³²⁵

This framework is especially relevant for intermediaries between the CDG and migrants in the Darién. While the CDG controls and extracts rent from the migration economy, daily interactions mostly involve local residents, guides, and small business

³²² Ibid. My translation

³²³ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023)

³²⁴ Achilli, L. (2018). The ‘Good’ Smuggler: The Ethics and Morals of Human Smuggling among Syrians. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), pp.77–96.

³²⁵ Ibid

owners. These intermediaries are frequently overlooked in analyses focusing solely on organised crime. Their involvement ranges from coercion and opportunism to economic necessity and solidarity.³²⁶ For example, Sarrut, Zuluaga, and Amaya document a local charity in Urabá providing migrant aid out of altruism, which was nonetheless targeted for rent extraction by the CDG.³²⁷ Many locals continue to assist migrants without payment, and when fees are charged, they often reflect the region's economic hardship - following recent tourism collapse, and more generally linked to peripheral development patterns. Facilitating migration thus resembles surviving economically, aligning with Achilli's findings from other contexts.³²⁵ This challenges the simplistic binary of actors as criminals or victims. In Urabá, the migration economy is embedded in local livelihoods and materially resembles the sector. Services like transport, guidance, food, and shelter - while on the boundaries of formality and informality - are locally understood as legitimate.³²⁸

Achilli further argues that dominant policy and media narratives, shaped by law enforcement and accounts of abuse, overlook these dynamics by framing smugglers as threats and migrants as passive victims.³²⁹ This narrative legitimises militarised enforcement and criminal sanctions but obscures the everyday realities in places like the Darién, where facilitators often reject the “smuggler” label. Many see themselves as making crossings safer and reducing risks, some describing their role as a form of social responsibility, providing jobs and guiding youth away from armed groups.³³⁰ Fees charged are frequently framed as compensation for lost income during COVID-19 rather than exploitation. Recent research supports this socio-economic reading, showing guides are often motivated more by lack of alternatives than greed.^{331 332}

To understand alternative governance in the Darién, it is thus essential to move beyond identifying coercive actors and instead appreciate the negotiations, solidarities, and survival strategies shaping interactions. Local actors, like migrants, are neither passive victims nor mere criminals; they are agents navigating overlapping legal regimes, economic marginalisation, and moral ambiguity. Achilli's work invites us to reframe

³²⁶ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023)

³²⁷ Sarrut, M., Echeverri Zuluaga, J. and Valenzuela Amaya, S. (2023) ³²⁵ Achilli, L. (2018).

³²⁸ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022).

³²⁹ Achilli, L. (2018).

³³⁰ Tobo, P.C., Cajiao, A.V. and Restrepo, M.B. (2022).

³³¹ Zuluaga, J.E. and Ordóñez, J.T. (2023)

³³² Velasco, S.Á. and Cielo, C. (2023). Circulations and Solidarities in the Darién. *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 55(4), pp.345–349. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2023.2280318>.

migration facilitation not solely as illicit activity but as deeply embedded in local contexts, reflecting ongoing social negotiation rooted in alternative forms of governance.

3.3 Internationally criminalised migration

The creation of illicit spaces capitalised on by alternative actors must be understood within an international migratory system that actively participates in the criminalisation of migration in the Darién. Trinkunas and Clunan argue that “illicit armed actors along the frontier can take advantage of both dimensions of borders – sovereignty and jurisdictional differences – to enable their activities.”³³³ Illegality in the Darién is not simply the result of a border “smuggling industry,” but rather the product of a nexus of coexisting legal regimes shaping the migratory experience. As Phillips suggests in his discussion of “dangerous, alternatively governed spaces,” borders simultaneously represent obstacles and opportunities, both symbolic and material, for actors seeking to commodify the crossing process.³³² In criminalising movements, states create the very conditions for its illicit marketisation.

This dynamic is echoed by Andreas, who observes that “the state-smuggler relationship is a paradoxical one, defined by irony and contradiction. The smuggler is pursued by the state but at the same time is kept in business by the state.”³³⁴ This highlights a deeper interdependence: alternative actors in the migration industry operate within a space both created and shaped by state legal, political, and territorial frameworks. By closing regular migration routes through restrictive visa policies or intensified border enforcement, states contribute to the emergence of alternatively governed spaces, often zones already on the periphery of state monopolisation. As legal routes close, migrants take more dangerous paths, typically run by private actors.³³⁵ This is the case in the Darién, where one major driver is the closure of sea and air routes by the U.S. and its Central American partners, producing illegality and inviting economic actors to capitalize on migrants’ needs. Since Panama’s crackdown at the border in July 2024, migration has not stopped but shifted onto more dangerous, costlier routes that

³³³ Trinkunas, H. and Clunan, A. (2015). Alternative Governance in Latin America. In: D.R. Mares and A.M. Kacowicz, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security*. London: Routledge, pp.99–109. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315867908-11>. Pg 103 ³³² Williams. P. (2010).

³³⁴ Andreas, P. (2000). *Border Games*. Cornell University Press. Pg 55

³³⁵ Martini, L.S. and Mezerisi, T. (2023). *Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation Is a Dead End*. [online] European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-whyeuropes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/>.

evade official statistics.³³⁶ Although states do not directly profit from illicit economies dominated by paramilitary groups, in the Darién's periphery, where alternative governance is deeply entrenched, the production of illegality, facilitated by the Colombian state's economically embedded autonomy and shaped by its peripheral position in the global order, is rapidly captured and capitalised on by alternative actors.

Though intermediary actors are criminalized for participating in an “illicit” economy, the legal status of migrants themselves is even more complex. Alternative governance in the Darién involves a nexus of actors, each governed by distinct legal regimes. Migrants simultaneously navigate CDG rules, Colombian law, Panamanian border control, and U.S. externalization policies, while paradoxically moving through spaces of impunity. These legal systems may compete or coexist, selectively activated depending on actors' interests. Sarrut captures this ambiguity, telling us that in the Darién migration “crystallises governance that is already historically in place. And what's interesting is that migration isn't cocaine, it's not an illicit sector. It's a sector with an undetermined legal status, and it's the state that decides.”³³⁷

From departure to arrival - leaving their origin country, boarding boats in Necoclí, traversing the Darién rainforest, crossing Central America, and possibly reaching the U.S.-Mexico border - migrants face multiple legal regimes with shifting rights and constraints. Molinari highlights how “the legal notion of borders is increasingly independent of its physical/geographical correspondence,” and that “legal border lines are not linked to any place on the ground, but rather follow irregular migrants as they move, confining them to areas of less law, no matter their location.”³³⁸ This insight applies to U.S. externalisation policies with Panama and illustrates how alternative governance from an international legal point of view leaves migrants in legally precarious situations, navigating a series of evolving constraints. The impact of this, according to a Colombian researcher is the following: “this governance framework is being established between countries, and that's very serious because it gives space to actors like the Clan del Golfo to be the only ones providing a response.”³³⁹ (interview, researcher, May 2025) The Darién is not lawless, nor does it fall under a monopolising

³³⁶ Darién: la frontera con alambres, migrantes pasando y el Clan controlando, (2024)

³³⁷ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 28 April. cf appendix 4. My translation

³³⁸ Molinari, C. (2022). The Borders of the Law: Legal Fictions, Elusive Borders, Migrants' Rights. *Politics and Governance*, [online] 10(2), pp.239–245. Available at: <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/4968/2725>. Pg 239

³³⁹ Researcher at a Colombian think tank (2025) *Interview with author*. Requested anonymity. [remote] 24 April. cf appendix 3.

jurisdiction. It is a space where the frontiers between the legal and the illegal are negotiated by alternative actors. The case of migration intensifies this co-existence as managing migratory flow is integrated into broader international political projects.

3.3.2 The criminalisation of a humanitarian emergency

The role of NGOs and international organizations providing “free” migrant services grows increasingly complex in such contexts. In alternatively governed areas, these actors may be seen as competitors by profit-driven groups controlling access and services along migration routes. Moreover, NGOs face legal constraints - any assistance perceived as facilitating unauthorized crossings risks criminalization as aiding people smuggling.³⁴⁰ Trapped in this double bind, humanitarian actors must navigate routes that are both increasingly inaccessible and controlled by armed groups engaged in illicit economies. Access often requires negotiating ethically fraught arrangements with these actors.³⁴¹ Meanwhile, the dangers faced by migrants continue to escalate, intensifying humanitarian needs just as the operational space for humanitarian actors is shrinking. The very process that amplifies risk and vulnerability also restricts the capacity to respond, creating a paradox where rising urgency is met with declining access. In this sense, the humanitarian crisis in the Darién is a collaborative inter-state production. In criminalising migration, and externalising borders, a new illicit “good” is created for local and international actors to manage.

Crucially, migration is far more than an illicit sector; it involves human lives and rights caught within forms of alternative governance. This typifies migration on dangerous “irregular” routes. In the Darién, migratory journeys fuel local and international economies - commodified, extracted, and managed through systems of alternative governance, with the CDG as a central rent-seeker. This system, rooted in a particular peripheral development model, is held together by discourses that justify and continuously reshape the roles of state and non-state actors in governing Urabá and the migratory phenomenon. These discourses often contain contradictions, inviting analysis of how alternative governance in the Darién is negotiated and moulded by converging and competing interests.

³⁴⁰ Collins, J. (2024a). *From dodgy deterrence deals to drug cartels: Aid barriers in the Darién*. [online] The New Humanitarian. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/09/18/dodgy-migration-deterrence-deals-drug-cartels-aid-barriers-darien-gap-colombia-panama>.

³⁴¹ Sarrut, M (2025) *Interview with author* [remote] 11 March. cf appendix 2. My translation

These intersecting interests lie at the heart of a region oscillating between state/non-state collusion and violent conflict for control. Migration through the Darién is not merely an object of analysis but a window into the complex, ongoing negotiations among local, national, and international actors pursuing political and economic goals. What makes migration a distinct case is that the objects of commodification and legal ambiguity are highly vulnerable human beings. Migrants are not just resources for profiteering businesses and predatory actors; our political economy approach aims not to reinforce that narrative but to expose the forms of alternative governance that have contributed to it and perpetuate this humanitarian emergency.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question of how the local, national and international political economy of migration on dangerous routes is shaped by and intertwined with alternative forms of governance. The Darién Gap has served as a key site for the conducting of such a study, due to its characteristic mosaic of competitive, collaborative, co-existing and interdependent relations between institutional, non-state and international actors.

Humanitarian emergencies on dangerous migratory routes have often been addressed through approaches seeking to reduce the factors behind human transit or enforce rules on criminal actors involved in their utilisation. This is a debate that goes beyond the Darién – it can be applied, for example, to the channel crossing between France and the UK, where policies tend to oscillate between disincentivising human movement through deterrents or dismantling the smuggling rings that facilitate migration. The case of migration through the Darién has allowed this thesis to offer a complementary perspective on humanitarian emergencies along dangerous routes, beyond halting or criminalising migration. Our approach allowed us to uncover how migration is inscribed in a wider political economy of transit in Colombia.

Rather than treating the Darién Gap as a lawless vacuum or an ungoverned frontier, the thesis has sought to understand how the region has long been shaped by overlapping and hybridised forms of governance. These are not anomalies or breakdowns of state control, but often the result of historically embedded practices that entangle state and non-state actors alike. In this context, governance is not absent but reconfigured - sometimes informally, sometimes violently- according to local dynamics and external logics of economic extraction, securitisation and mobility management.

By tracing the historical evolution of power in the Darién, from the colonial period to 2025, we observed how the region has been persistently marginalised in national imaginaries, while simultaneously targeted for commercial penetration and control. This long-standing peripheralization has facilitated the emergence of what we term “alternative governance” - a framework in which legality and illegality are co-constituted and operationalised by a diversity of actors. Within this framework, groups such as the CDG today are not external to governance, but actively embedded within its fabric, drawing upon and reproducing paramilitary logics, networks and infrastructures that were never fully dismantled by the state. The relationship between the Colombian

state and non-state armed actors in the region is best characterised not by absence, but by embedded autonomy - whereby state institutions maintain partial authority while allowing, tolerating or even collaborating with alternative structures of control. This cohabitation does not negate state power but redefines it, often blurring the lines between regulation and complicity, protection and extortion, enforcement and abandonment.

This embedded autonomy is particularly visible in the organisation of the migratory journey through the Darién, where the state oscillates between logistical facilitation, passive tolerance and selective enforcement. The passage of migrants is not simply a humanitarian concern or a matter of border security - it is a site of profit, rent extraction, negotiation and control. The commodification of mobility in the region reflects broader logics of extractivism: human movement is rendered profitable, manageable and governable through informal and formal means alike.

Through this lens, migration is not only shaped by governance but becomes a key mechanism through which governance itself is enacted. Migrants' trajectories through the Darién expose the contours of this alternative governance regime, revealing how international humanitarian actors, local communities, organised crime networks and state agencies interact to produce a layered architecture of control. Each checkpoint, each payment, each risk endured by migrants is inscribed in a broader system that strives from movement while often failing to protect the lives that enable it.

In exposing this architecture, the thesis also calls attention to the human costs of these arrangements. Migrants in the Darién are rendered vulnerable not only by terrain or violence, but by a governance regime that systematically dehumanises and criminalises their mobility. The interplay between state neglect, armed control, and economic interest reproduces a form of rule that transforms people in transit into both targets and resources. Ultimately, the Darién Gap offers a powerful case through which to understand how contemporary borders are governed not by clear lines of sovereignty or legality, but through the convergence of actors, interests and regimes that function both within and beyond the state. Migration, far from disrupting this order, becomes one of its central expressions.

This analysis contributes to scholarship questioning state-centric models of governance and opening new avenues for understanding how mobility is managed, monetised and morally adjudicated across global peripheries. It suggests that any response to humanitarian crises on migratory routes must move beyond simplistic

binaries of state presence or absence, legality or criminality. Instead, it must begin from a recognition of the complex, historically rooted configurations of power that shape movement, and the urgent need to centre the lives and rights of those forced to navigate them.

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