



Venezuela Under Nicolás Maduro: A Test of Strength

Dmitry Rozentel

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Introduction

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has been in a deep economic and political crisis for almost a decade. Both the domestic opposition and a tangible part of the international community dispute the legitimacy of its government. The country is being deprived of a large share of foreign investment and has been subjected to many sanctions by the countries of the collective West. Venezuela's population is short of basic necessities and medications, which has led to social unrest and significant emigration.

Despite the desperate situation, the Nicolás Maduro government has managed (at least, so far) to control the political decision-making, rebuff attacks by the opposition and withstand external pressure, including the sanctions. Moreover, in 2022, the country is expected to see recovery growth, which, according to the more optimistic forecasts, could reach 20 percent.¹ The minimum wage has been increased from \$7 to \$30 an hour.² According to a poll by the Delphos research company, 41.6 percent of Venezuelans have noted an improvement in the social situation.³

Several events converged to help even out the general dynamics in the country: a change of the US administration (Joe Biden reduced pressure on the Maduro government); the COVID-19 pandemic (the quarantine restrictions limited the public social response making protests more difficult); and price increases on energy resources (largely a result of the crisis in Ukraine) all mitigated the situation. At the same time, it should be noted that the authorities in Venezuela demonstrated a substantial strength. They managed to defend against the attack of the opposition without an efficient economic system, functioning government institutions or public support. This refutes many traditional ideas about the sustainability of political regimes, which suggests an in-depth analysis is in order.

Many Russian and foreign historiographies have analysed the political crisis in Venezuela, including its international and social projections. Russian scholars Zbigniew Iwanowski⁴ and Petr Yakovlev⁵ have carried out an in-depth analysis of the causes.

¹ Fieser E. Itriago Acosta A. Venezuelan Economy to Grow 20% This Year, Credit Suisse Says // Bloomberg. 07.04.2022. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-06/venezuela-s-economy-may-expand-20-in-2022-credit-suisse-says>.

² Yapur N. Venezuela's Economy Seen Growing Most in 15 Years as Oil Flows // Bloomberg. 30.06.2022. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-30/venezuela-economy-seen-growing-most-in-15-years-as-oil-flows>.

³ Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022. URL: <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>

⁴ Ивановский З., Розенталь Д. Венесуэла: политическое противостояние и мировое сообщество // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 25: Международные отношения и мировая политика. Т. 12. № 2, 2020. С. 71–111.

⁵ Яковлев П.П. Венесуэла: кризис эпохи конфликтной многополярности // Латинская Америка. №1, 2019. С. 38–52.

Prominent American expert Javier Corrales⁶ and Venezuelan analyst Margarita Lopez Maya⁷ have described the peculiarities of the regime in Venezuela. American expert Evan Ellis⁸ wrote about security issues in terms of the confrontation in Venezuela. Finally, the monograph published by the RAS Institute of Latin America in 2021⁹ offered a comprehensive analysis of the situation in this Latin American country.

However, the analysts have not largely undertaken a serious study of the factors that contribute to the sustainability of the Venezuelan regime. The only exception is a work by Russian scholar Viktor Semyonov who tried to analyse the reasons behind Maduro's victory in the 2018 presidential election. He basically suggested that the government used its administrative resources and distributed food packages to the people.¹⁰ Javier Corrales also contributed an analysis of the political system in the Bolivarian Republic. He identified the dependence between the correlation of forces (the government versus the opposition) and the broad range of powers held by the head of state and his influence on decision-making.¹¹

A deeper analysis of the mechanisms interwoven into the Venezuelan political system, which helps keep the current government in power, will help us better understand the current peculiarities of the Bolivarian Republic and similar regimes in other parts of the world and will help better determine their strong and weak points. This task is becoming particularly urgent as we see the number of conflicts grow in international relations. Destructive influences from outside, sanctions and public protests can exert considerable influence on various countries and can lead to a regime change. An understanding of stabilizing and destabilizing factors can help determine the limit of their durability and predict changes in the political landscape in different parts of the world. Russia can benefit from Venezuela's experience as well. Identifying the positive and negative aspects of domestic political developments in Venezuela might reveal the best formula for state building under conditions of external pressure and could help avoid the mistakes committed by both sides in the conflict in Venezuela.

⁶ Corrales J. Democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities: The case of Venezuela // *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. № 109, 2020. P. 41–65.

⁷ López Maya M. El colapso de Venezuela ¿qué sigue? // *Pensamiento Propio*. № 47, 2018. P. 13–35.

⁸ Ellis E. The collapse of Venezuela and its impact on the region // *Military Review*. №. 4, 2017. P. 22–33.

⁹ Гордиев узел венесуэльского кризиса. Серия «Саммит» // М.: ИЛА РАН. 2021.

¹⁰ Семенов В. Венесуэльский кризис в контексте президентских выборов // *Латинская Америка*. №12, 2018. С. 37–48.

¹¹ Corrales J. *Fixing Democracy. Why Constitutional Change Often Fails to Enhance Democracy in Latin America* // Oxford University Press. 2018.

The contours of the political system

An acute socioeconomic crisis in Venezuela was inevitable. The reasons lie in the political system whereby all power belonged to the president. Hugo Chavez' credibility (1999–2013) replaced institutions, consolidated the country's elite and enjoyed strong public support. The death of the president was a heavy blow to the structure he had built, and it led to a period of deep instability.

Venezuela's case is not unique. Strong personalities have led many countries where the political system was tailored to their needs. But the crisis in Venezuela stands out in scale and for the international repercussions. The crisis clearly revealed the factors that contributed to the regime's sustainability and the factors that led to a long period of instability.

The regime that was ultimately established in Venezuela was largely the result of painful neo-liberal reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Measures designed to resuscitate the economy led to poverty among a large part of the population and social inequality and unemployment.¹² This led to a demand for state paternalism and pushed low-income strata to protest. These people became Chavez' electoral base which allowed him to come to power in 1999.

Having assumed his duties, Chavez launched a massive campaign to redistribute state money in a system that favoured low-income people. This included social benefits and subsidies and missions – programmes for targeted aid for the population. This provided Chavez with public support, strengthened his electoral position and predetermined the country's development by identifying what the people wanted from the government.

¹² Кудеярова Н., Сударев В. «Левый поворот» в Латинской Америке: единство противоположностей и новые векторы в геополитике // «Левый поворот» в Латинской Америке. Под ред. Сударева В.П. М.: ИЛА РАН. 2007. С. 61–78.

Given the electoral diplomacy that existed during the Chavez administration and the strong competition for votes, the government had to meet the public's demands and allocate considerable funds for this purpose. At the same time, state paternalism strengthened the country's dependence on oil. Thus, in the first half of the 2000s hydrocarbon sales accounted for 80 percent of exports,¹³ whereas now this figure has reached 99 percent.¹⁴

The government's efforts to control the main source of its revenue was a side effect of its dependence on oil exports. It naturally strengthened the authoritarian tendencies of the executive branch which was constantly expanding its influence over the extraction industry. The risk of losing this dominant position compelled the government to remove the opposition from the decision-making process.

Chavez' control over oil resources allowed him to ignore any effort to coordinate his decisions with the national elite. Proceeding from his own vision, Chavez spent a high percent of government funds on the needs of society and on resolving the country's goals in the international arena.¹⁵

The balance of power between the government and the opposition became an important factor in determining the structure of Venezuela's political system, which was taking shape during a deep crisis among the traditional parties – Democratic Action (*Acción Democrática, AD*) and the Committee of the Independent Electoral Political Organisation (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, COPEI*). Other public associations did not have the necessary resources or electoral support to oppose the government or they preferred to form a tactical alliance with it.¹⁶

The 1999 constitution expanded the powers of the president. Thus, the abolition of the Senate (the legislative power was represented by the unicameral National Assembly) weakened the position of the states where

¹³ Manzano O. Venezuela after a century of oil exploitation // Venezuela: Anatomy of a Collapse. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238097227_Venezuela_after_a_century_of_oil_exploitation.

¹⁴ Venezuela facts and figures // Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. URL: https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/171.htm.

¹⁵ Андреев А., Розенталь Д. Левый регионализм в Латинской Америке: традиции и современность // PolitBook. № 1, 2021. С. 25–47.

¹⁶ Розенталь Д. Венесуэла: траектория развития рабочего движения // Латиноамериканский исторический альманах. № 28, 2020. С. 86–112.

the opposition parties were still strong.¹⁷ The constitution did not have a provision for impeachment. Instead, it provided for a referendum on the early termination of powers of any official. The initiation of this procedure required great effort and took place under government influence.¹⁸ The constitution also limited the autonomy of the Central Bank.¹⁹ In 2004, the number of judges in the Supreme Court increased from 20 to 32. New judges were introduced by decision of the National Assembly which was under the control of the executive branch (the National Assembly's 2016–2021 convocation was the only exception). That said, the judges could be recalled by a qualified majority in parliament,²⁰ which also strengthened the Supreme Court's dependence on the government and the president.

The advent of the Socialist United Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV*), which united all pro-government forces, was an important event in the country's political system.

It stood out in sheer numbers – it had 5.7 million members even at its founding congress.²¹ The party included representatives of the ruling elite, ministers, National Assembly deputies, governors and city mayors. The merging of the party and state apparatus was formalised.

Despite the obvious trends toward weakening the role of parliament and the Supreme Court, and the use of administrative resources in election campaigns (in part, gerrymandering – the manipulation of electoral district boundaries), Hugo Chavez enjoyed considerable public support. In 2011, his approval ratings exceeded 70 percent,²² while the Electoral Democracy Index,²³ an indicator of trust in elections, was steadily growing from 21.11 points in 2000 to 35.66 points in 2012.²⁴

¹⁷ Corrales J. Fixing Democracy. Why Constitutional Change Often Fails to Enhance Democracy in Latin America // Oxford University Press. 2018.

¹⁸ Ивановский З., Розенталь Д. Венесуэла: политическое противостояние и мировое сообщество // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 25: Международные отношения и мировая политика. Т. 12. № 2, 2020. С. 71–111.

¹⁹ Дабагян Э. Венесуэльская конституция 1999 г.: политико-юридическая характеристика // Латинская Америка. №2, 2001. С. 43–45.

²⁰ Ивановский З. Латинская Америка: электоральное законодательство и властные структуры. (Справочник) // М.: ИЛА РАН. 2014.

²¹ Iwanowski Z. Partidos políticos de Venezuela en las condiciones de la polarización // Iberoamérica. № 4, 2018. P. 27–52.

²² Devereux Ch. Chavez's Approval Rating at 71.5% in IVAD Poll, Ultimas Says // Bloomberg. 10.12.2011. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-12-10/chavez-s-approval-rating-at-71-5-in-ivad-poll-ultimas-says>.

²³ Electoral Democracy Index refers to Tatu Vanhanen's "ID = (C x P) : 100" formula, where C is the number of votes gained by the opposition and P is voter turnout.

²⁴ According to Consejo Nacional Electoral de Venezuela. URL: http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/estadisticas/index_resultados_elecciones.php.

These results were largely due to state paternalism and the personality traits of the president himself – his ability to consolidate the elite and bring his ideas home to the public. Chavez skilfully manoeuvred through a complicated landscape of domestic political forces, playing on their contradictions. In addition, he did not allow government officials to gain excessive influence by regularly reshuffling his cabinet of ministers.²⁵

Causes behind the political and economic crisis

The Venezuelan crisis is the result of many circumstances. Some have been thoroughly analysed in scholarly undertakings whereas others have not yet received much attention. Traditionally, historiography focusses on economic problems²⁶ because they are easier to understand and measure. However, this focus alone cannot explain either the reasons for the instability or the factors that have allowed the regime to endure internal and external pressure.

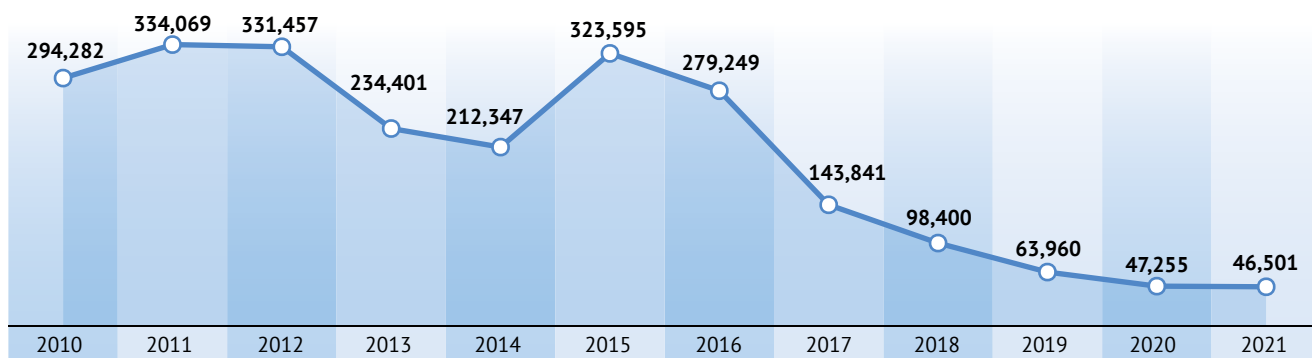
The Economy

Excessive dependence on hydrocarbons has been a serious problem for Venezuela. Substantial oil reserves are not a court sentence. Countries with well-functioning institutions can offset the negative effects of an “oil curse.” However, like most Latin American countries, the Bolivarian Republic had weak institutions and found it difficult to establish a stabilisation fund because it had to divert the profits from oil sales to domestic and foreign policy needs.

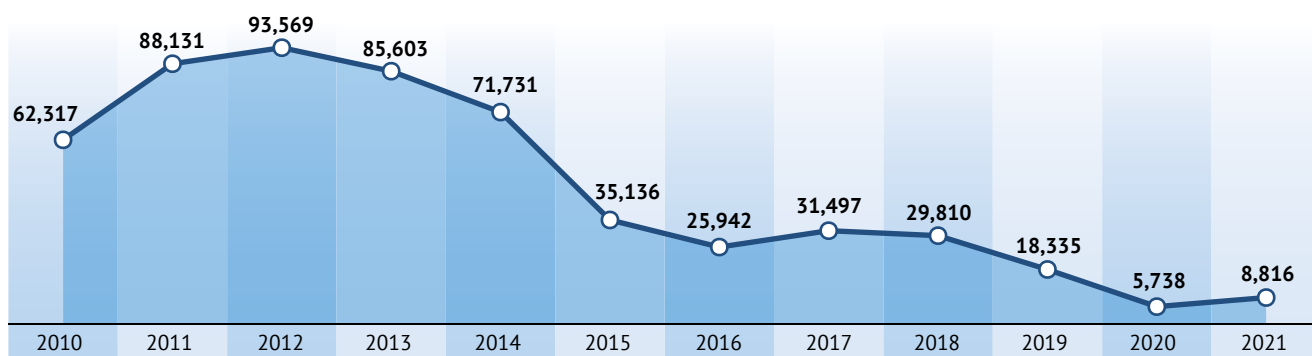
²⁵ Corrales J. Hugo Boss // Foreign Policy. January-February, 2006. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/19/hugo-boss/> (https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/47813/original/Corrales_152%2BForeign%2BPolicy%2B2006.pdf)

²⁶ Семёнов В. Финал Боливарианского проекта? // Латинская Америка. №1, 2017. С. 38–51.

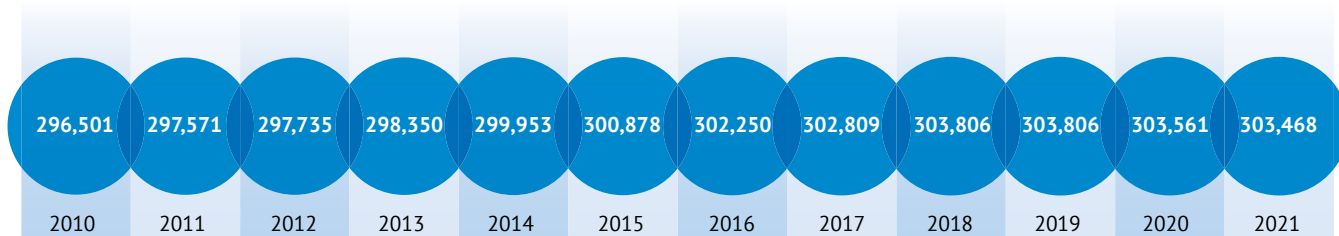
GDP at current market prices (m \$)



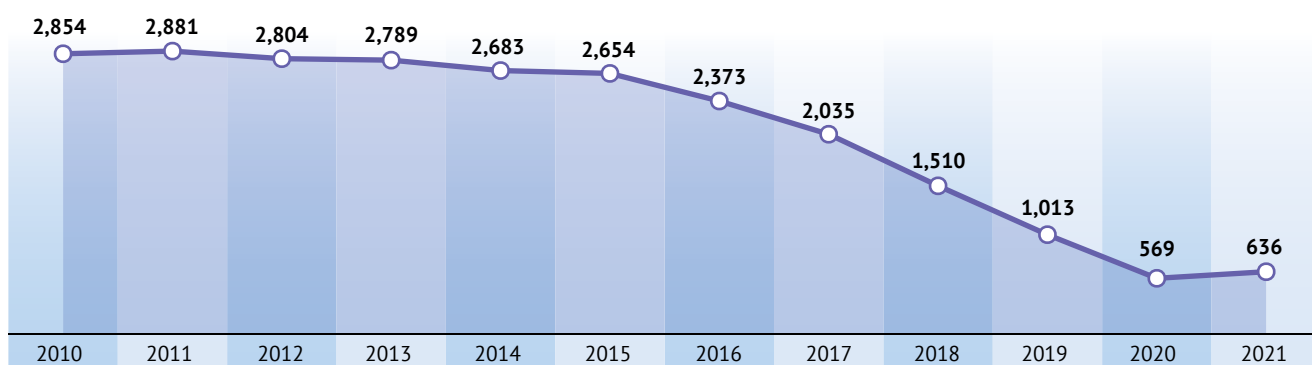
Values of petroleum exports (m \$)



Proven crude oil reserves (m b)



Crude oil production (1,000 b/d)



Source: OPEC

The uncontrolled use of resources led to inefficient spending and corruption, even though the oil industry helped resolve many social problems. Moreover, the funds spent on social needs became a heavy burden on the budget. In the first stage of the Bolivarian revolution, care for the low-income strata did not require much spending,²⁷ but further on, the country had to spend substantial funds on housing construction, education institutions and various missions.

In addition, it was spending money on the ideas of socialism in the 21st century²⁸ abroad through propaganda. Caracas lavishly funded close political forces and public organisations throughout Latin America.²⁹ These expenses were growing every year. Venezuela's diplomacy and energy cooperation programmes in the region became so substantial that, to cite Russian researcher Andrei Pyatakov, it became possible to talk about "the Bolivarian system of international relations."³⁰

The situation changed in 2014. Caracas lost a big part of its revenue due to collapsing oil prices. There was a distinct decline in hydrocarbon production; by July 2017, production dropped to 2.1 million barrels a day (compared with 2.9 million barrels in 2013).³¹ The decline continued in the following years (in June 2022 it dropped to 727,000 barrels).³² This negative dynamic was partly due to the lack of technical sophistication in the domestic oil industry³³ and the unattractive investment climate caused, among other things, by the nationalisation of foreign assets in the Bolivarian Republic. Venezuela did not have enough money to develop its deposits³⁴ and in 2020, production drilling was stopped altogether.³⁵

²⁷ Андрианов В. Ловушка нефтеэкономической модели: уроки Венесуэлы // Власть. №4, 2021. С. 277–285.

²⁸ Socialism of the 21st century – a concept that became part of the political practice of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. It provided for mending deformities and renouncing the dogmas of traditional socialism, the expansion of the socialisation of economic activity, a striving for regional unity, a course toward social development, participation of armed forces in social processes and tolerant attitude to the departure from conservative values.

²⁹ Халитов Б. «Энергетическая дипломатия» Боливарианского правительства Венесуэлы // Латинская Америка. № 10, 2007. С. 28–35.

³⁰ Пятаков А. Боливарианская международная система: итоги пятилетия и перспективы // Латинская Америка. № 11, 2009. С. 38–51.

³¹ Vladimir's Venezuel // Reuters Graphics. 11.08.2017. URL: <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/VENEZUELA-RUSSIA-OIL/010050DS0W3/index.html>.

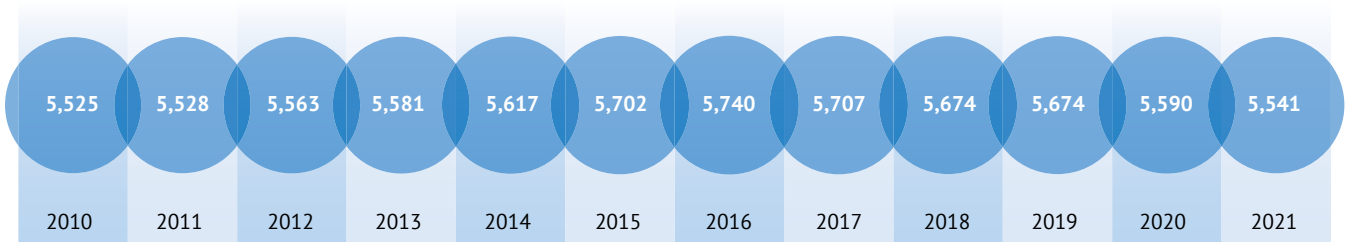
³² Venezuela Crude Oil Production // Trading Economics. URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/venezuela/crude-oil-production>.

³³ Thomas W. O'Donnell Russia Is Beating China to Venezuela's Oil Fields // Americas Quarterly. 04.02.2016. URL: <http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/russia-beating-china-venezuelas-oil-fields>.

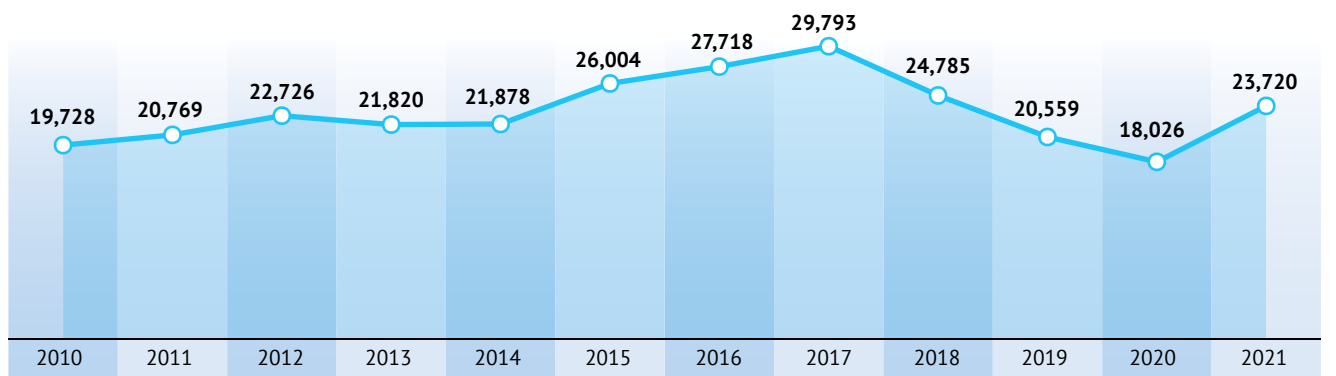
³⁴ Шинкаренко А. Кризис добычи нефти в Венесуэле в контексте «пекинского консенсуса» // Norwegian Journal of development of the International Science. № 35, 2019. С. 58–63.

³⁵ Андрианов В.В. Венесуэльская нефть: возможен ли come back? // Латинская Америка. № 4, 2022. С. 55–72.

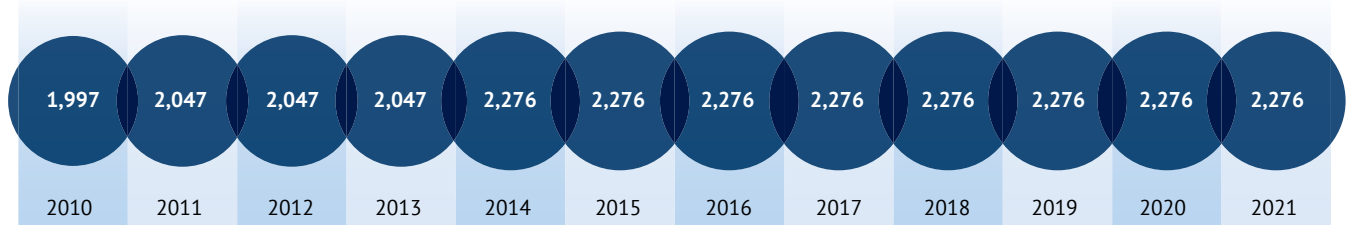
Proven natural gas reserves (bn standard cu m)



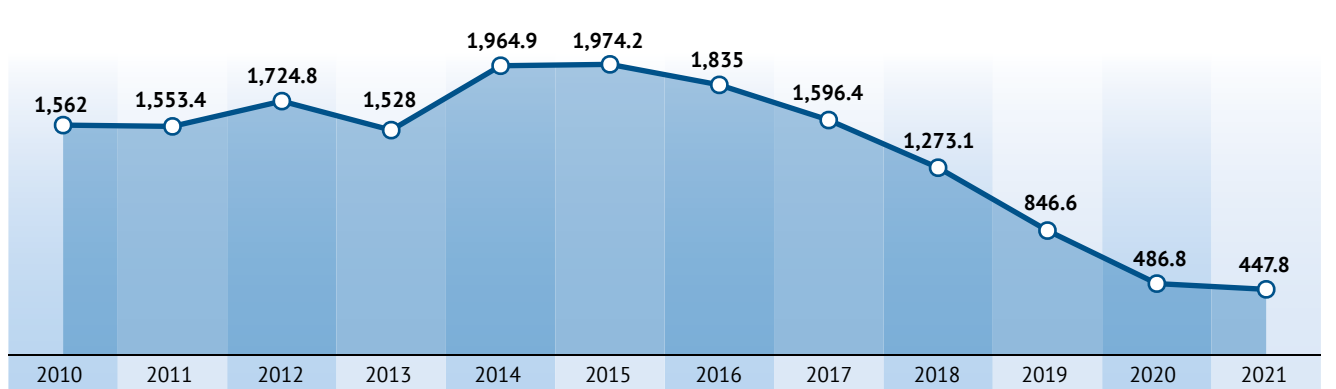
Marketed production of natural gas (million standard cu m)



Refinery capacity (1,000 b/cd)

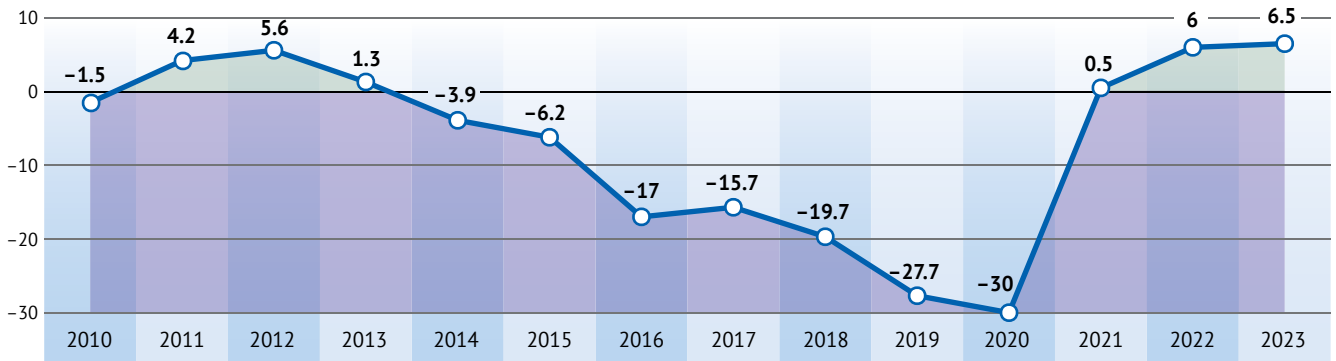


Crude oil exports (1,000 b/d)

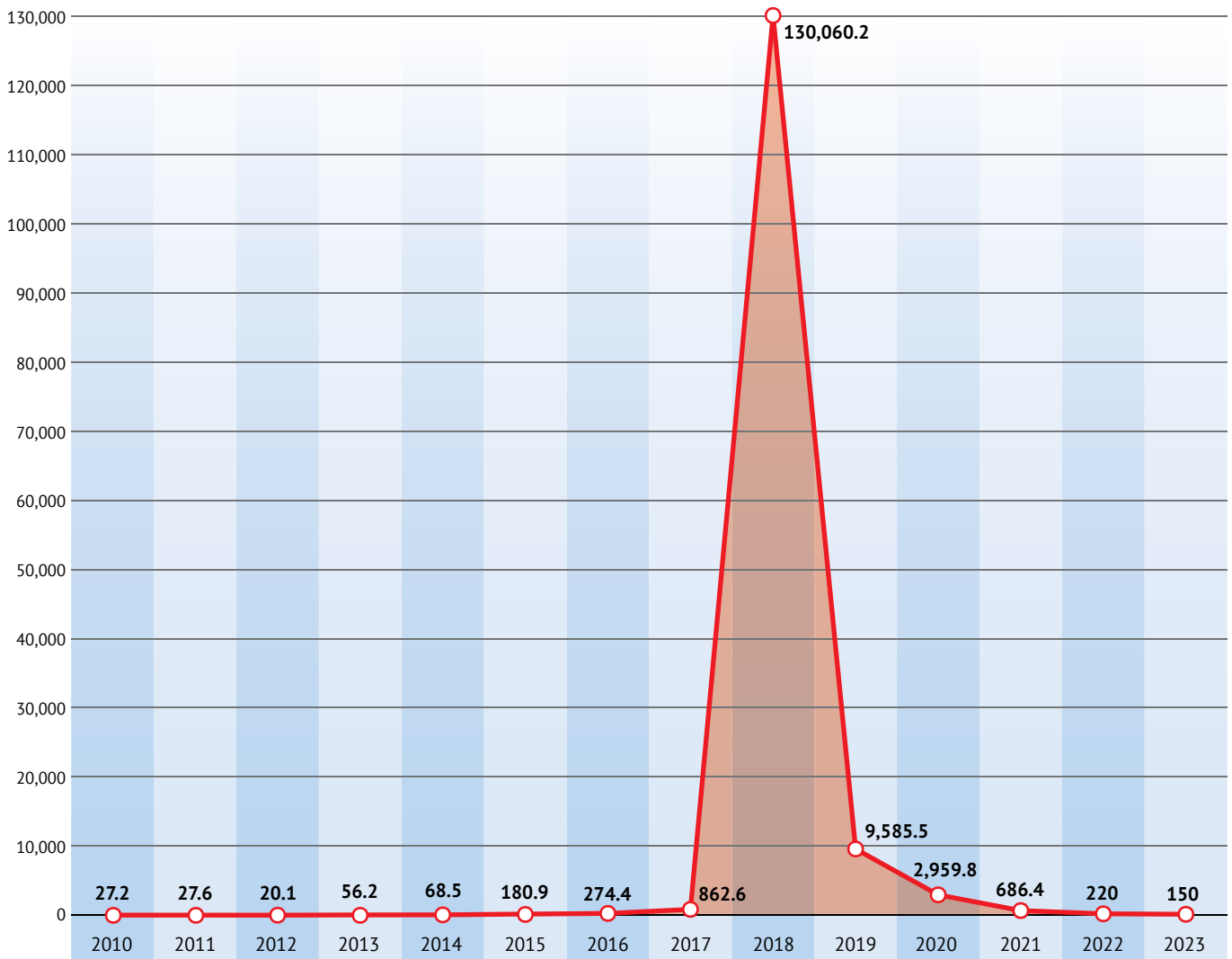


Source: OPEC

Real GDP growth (Annual percent change)



Inflation rate, end of period consumer prices (Annual percent change)



Source: IMF, 2022

GDP growth rates began to slow even before the collapse of world oil prices. In 2013, this indicator dropped to 1.3 percent from 5.6 percent in 2012.³⁶ A year later, GDP actually retracted (-3.9 percent).³⁷ And in 2013, inflation exceeded 56 percent.³⁸ The deterioration of the international environment expedited the decline of the Venezuelan economy where the problems were not limited to the “fuel curse.”

The drop in GDP growth could largely be explained by the limits of the country’s economic model. Reliance on command and administrative management methods, a reduction in the role of medium and large companies, and broad nationalisation (a tactic frequently used under pressure from the workers) made the national economy much less efficient.³⁹ In 1999-2013 alone, 170,000 of 617,000 private companies went bankrupt,⁴⁰ and many of them were expropriated.

During the serious struggles against the opposition, the government often sacrificed the economy to politics. Professionals were removed from major industries and replaced with administrators that were loyal to the authorities but lacked experience. During the 2002 oil strikes alone, about 20,000 employees of the PDVSA oil and gas state-owned company were fired, including top professionals.⁴¹ There was a personnel drain in the electric power industry as well.⁴²

For a long time Venezuela was using several exchange rates for its national currency – the Bolivar – at the same time. Prices were fixed for essential goods and medications, which led to their shortage. These setbacks caused public discontent that soon developed into protests. The

³⁶ Семенов В. Финал Боливарианского проекта? // Латинская Америка. №1, 2017. С. 38–51.

³⁷ GDP growth (annual %) – Venezuela, RB, Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income) // The World Bank. URL: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=VE-XJ&name_desc=fal-se.

³⁸ Venezuela’s inflation rate is 56% in 2013 // Business Insider. 30.12.2013. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/venezuelas-inflation-rate-is-56-2013-12>.

³⁹ Семенов В. Венесуэла в новом веке: итоги и перспективы // Мировая экономика и международные отношения. №5, 2014. С.73–82.

⁴⁰ Моисеев А. МЕРКОСУР: Чавеса приняли как родного // Международная жизнь. 13.08.2012. URL: <http://interaffairs.ru/print.php?item=8675>.

⁴¹ LeVine S. Where all of Hugo Chavez’s oil workers went // Quartz. 08.10.2012. URL: <https://qz.com/12984/where-all-of-hugo-chavezs-oil-workers-went/>.

⁴² Гордиев узел венесуэльского кризиса. Серия «Саммит» // М.: ИЛА РАН. 2021.

number of protests was steadily on the rise. In 2012, there were over 2,970 demonstrations by people unhappy about their socioeconomic status, whereas in 2018 this number increased to 11,299.⁴³

Political contradictions kept the government from launching market reforms. The associated deterioration in living standards could erode the social and electoral base of the national leadership.

Politics

Hugo Chavez' death in 2013 largely destabilised the government's position. The main ideologue, creator and executor of the reforms in the country, he became the load-bearing member of the system he created, and he consolidated the elite and a considerable part of society. His credibility and influence over social processes allowed him to monopolise the decision-making process.

The regime's identification with Chavez' personality complicated the transition of power to another politician. The de facto lack of a transition mechanism made even the choice of a successor a serious trial for the system. Moreover, Nicolás Maduro failed to find a formula for the constructive co-existence of the elite in Venezuelan society. Conflicts flared up between different groups of influence. A number of functionaries accused Maduro of revisionism (the statement by former Planning Minister Jorge Giordani had the loudest impact).⁴⁴

A change in management style influenced Venezuela's political system considerably. A serious decline in average income no longer allowed the government to rely on the broad masses – there were no funds to support them with. A stake was made on supporting officials and the military, which largely made Maduro dependent on them. The squabbling for influence on the head of state by the functionaries prevented the government from making the necessary reforms in a timely manner.

⁴³ Elementos de una transición integral e incluyente en Venezuela: una visión desde lo local // Caracas, Instituto para las Transiciones Integrales (IFIT). 2020.

⁴⁴ Giordani J. Testimonio y responsabilidad ante la historia // Aporrea. 18.06.2014. URL: <http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a190011.html#sdnotapie12anc>.

The Maduro administration was subjected to heavy international pressure. This was primarily expressed in the US's actions during the Trump presidency. Trump's team was trying to resolve two tasks at once. It curbed the influence of the antagonist country in the Western Hemisphere and it received support from the Washington hawks who were traditionally hostile to Venezuela.⁴⁵

In addition, energy diplomacy,⁴⁶ an important foreign policy mechanism for Caracas, began malfunctioning with the drop in oil production, and its influence in the region fell. Finally, Latin American countries pressured the Bolivarian Republic in response to support for their left opposition movements by the Chavistas.⁴⁷

The sectoral sanctions and the blocking imposed on Venezuela by the United States and its allies expedited the free fall of social indicators and put the Venezuelan population on the brink of a humanitarian disaster. By UN estimates, 7 million citizens in Venezuela need assistance.⁴⁸

The Maduro government was compelled to mobilise all its forces to counter external and internal pressure and use measures that were legally dubious. For example, the de facto deprivation of the political rights of the National Assembly controlled by the opposition in 2016–2021, and the convocation of the National Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC*) – the authorities gave its powers a broad interpretation⁴⁹ in a bid to replace a disloyal parliament with this structure.

⁴⁵ Розенталь Д. Венесуэльская головоломка для Джо Байдена // Россия и Америка в XXI веке. №1, 2021.

⁴⁶ Venezuela reduce un 40% el envío de barriles de petróleo // Diario Las Américas. 08.07.2016. URL: <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/venezuela-reduce-un-40-el-envio-barriles-petroleo-cuba-n3924796>.

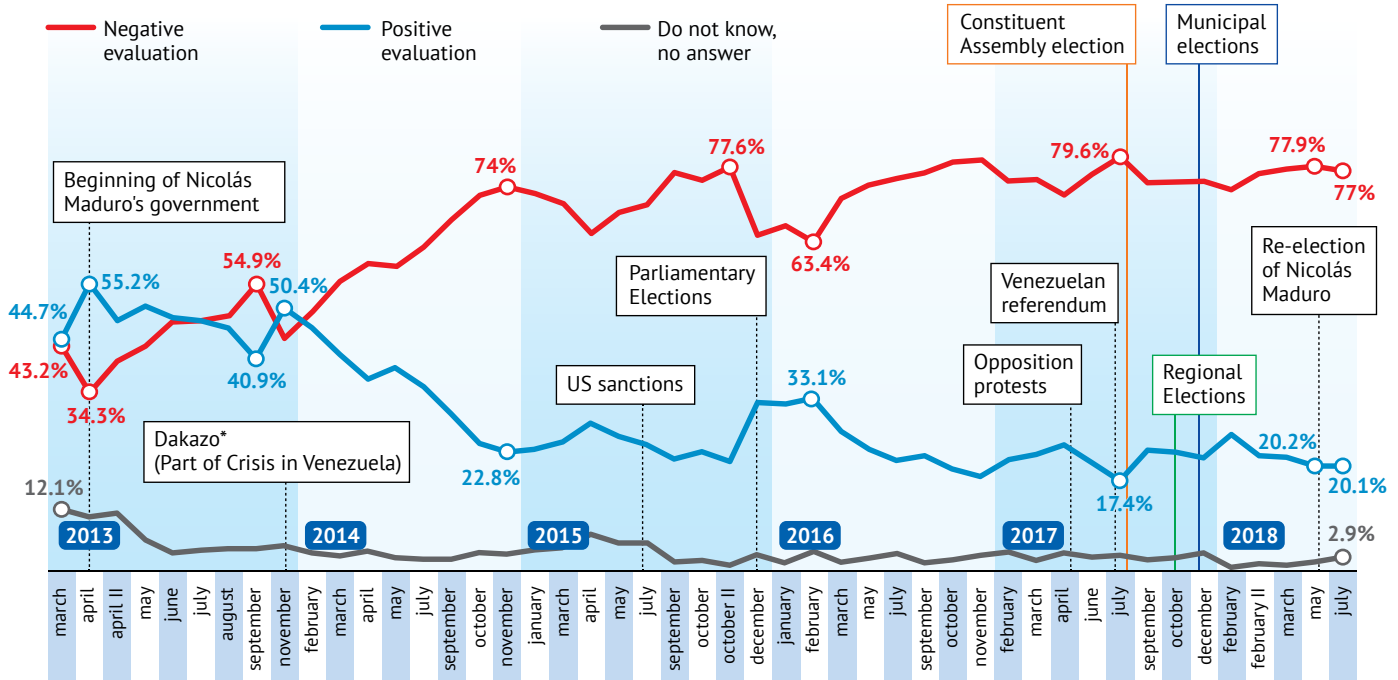
⁴⁷ Corrales J. Opinion: Foreign Forces Did Not Start Venezuela's Transition.Venezuela Did // NPR 24. 30.01.2019. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/30/689286896/opinion-foreign-forces-did-not-start-venezuelas-transition-venezuela-did>.

⁴⁸ Seven million people require some form of humanitarian or protection assistance in Venezuela // United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 13.10.2022. URL: <https://www.unocha.org/Venezuela>.

⁴⁹ Bolívar J. La Constituyente y el oculto amparo del artículo 349 // Aporrea. 14.06.2017. URL: <https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a247659.html>.

PRESIDENT MADURO'S APPROVAL RATING

How do you evaluate the work of Nicolás Maduro for the well-being of the country?



* Dakazo* (from the name of the network of electronics stores "Daka") – the practice of state forcing the retail companies to sell home appliances at reduced prices before the elections.

Source: datanalisis.com (August 2018)

They were de-emphasising the institutionalisation of the political system. The established rules of the game were upset. Many Chavistas, including a number of functionaries in the United Socialist Party of Venezuela⁵⁰ had an ambivalent attitude towards the actions of the national leaders. Support for Nicolás Maduro diminished substantially. During the peak of the crisis in 2019, public opinion agencies *Datanalisis* and *Meganalisis* assessed his popularity rankings at 12.9 percent⁵¹ and 4 percent, respectively.⁵² The legitimacy of the head of state declined.

⁵⁰ Rozentel D. Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela: Prueba por la Crisis // Iberoamerica. Nº 1, 2021. P. 96–111.

⁵¹ Wicary S., Arrijoja J.E. Cuba says Maduro must be at negotiating table to fix Venezuela // Bloomberg. 07.05.2019. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-06/cuba-says-maduro-must-be-at-negotiating-table-to-fix-venezuela>.

⁵² Solo 4.1 % de venezolanos reconocen a Maduro como presidente: Guaidó se alza con 84.6 % de apoyo popular (Flash Meganálisis) // La patilla.02.02.2019. URL: <https://www.lapatilla.com/2019/02/02/solo-4-1-de-venezolanos-reconocen-a-maduro-como-presidente-guaido-se-alza-con-84-6-de-apoyo-popular-flash-meganalisis/>

At the 2018 elections, the Democracy Index dropped to its lowest point during the entire existence of the Bolivarian Republic – 14.82 percent.⁵³ The international isolation of Caracas increased – about 60 states recognised opposition leader Juan Guaidó, the interim president.

Maduro government's reserves of strength

Despite the desperate position of the Maduro administration, the political regime in Venezuela resisted the pressure of circumstances. As the crisis deepened, its authoritarian features became increasingly prominent, allowing the government to tighten its control over social processes and government branches. The influence of the administrative resource at elections became stronger.⁵⁴ The government retained its ability to counter domestic opposition and external forces.

The military

The power apparatus, primarily, the army, played the most important role in this. Despite the claims of the opposition that up to 85 percent of the Armed Forces personnel advocate changes in the country, they are officially loyal to the executive government.⁵⁵ Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and top-ranking generals have publicly expressed support for the current president, albeit with some exceptions. One of them is the former Head of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (*Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional*), Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera.

⁵³ According to Divulgación de Resultados Elecciones 2018 // Consejo Nacional Electoral. URL: <http://www.cne.gob.ve/ResultadosElecciones2018/>.

⁵⁴ See also: Розенталь Д. Анатомия политического кризиса в Венесуэле // Пути к миру и безопасности. №1, 2019. С. 22–33.

⁵⁵ Guaidó: Tenemos a militares en puestos de comando trabajando por la Operación Libertad // Crónica.Uno. 09.06.2019. URL: <https://cronica.uno/guaido-tenemos-militares-puestos-comando-trabajando-operacion-libertad/>.

The ability of law-enforcement bodies to ensure public discipline and use violence if need be became an important resource of the government's strength. It is enough to mention the destruction of Oscar Perez's unit, which had made several attacks on government agencies⁵⁶ or the failure of Operation Gedeon.⁵⁷ The maintenance of law and order often resulted in violence and civilian losses. According to the UN Human Rights Council, in 2018 alone, more than 5,000 people perished in Venezuela as a result of the actions of the law enforcement agencies.⁵⁸

However, the military and law enforcement employees are experiencing the same problems as the overwhelming majority of Venezuelan citizens – the shortage of medications and essential products, power outages and rampant crime.

The main reason of their loyalty is the *privileged* position of the military in Venezuela. They are actively involved in the economic life of the country and control key industries. According to some estimates, 35 generals launched their own private companies, which then became key players in various industries, winning 225 contracts from state corporations.⁵⁹ Retirees are involved in diplomatic and government work.⁶⁰ Some media are accusing the military of corruption and involvement in drug trafficking.⁶¹

The government is committed to supporting the officers, giving them rapid promotions. The Venezuelan Army has about 2,000 generals – more

⁵⁶ Gedeon was a failed combat operation organised by Silvercorp, an American private military company, with the participation of former Venezuelan military living in Colombia. Its goal was to seize Nicolas Maduro.

⁵⁷ Charner F., Hernandez O., Barnes T. Source: Rogue Venezuelan helicopter pilot killed by police // CNN. 01.15.2015. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/15/americas/venezuela-oscar-perez-dead/index.html>.

⁵⁸ Fabiana Sofia Perera How Chávez Broke Venezuela's Military // Americas quarterly. 15.12.2019. URL: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/how-chavez-broke-venezuelas-military/>.

⁵⁹ How Venezuela Bought Military Loyalty // OCCRP. 10.04.2020. URL: <https://www.occrp.org/en/revolution-to-riches/how-venezuela-bought-military-loyalty>.

⁶⁰ Diamint R. ¿Quién custodia a los custodios? Democracia y uso de la fuerza en América Latina // Nueva Sociedad. Noviembre–Diciembre 2018. URL: <http://nuso.org/articulo/quien-custodia-loscustodios-democracia-y-uso-de-la-fuerza-en-america-latina>.

⁶¹ La organización terrorista que Nicolás Maduro es acusado de liderar // El Tiempo. 27.03.2020.

than the joint forces of NATO.⁶² Vladimir Padrino Lopez is one of the most influential officials in the Bolivarian Republic. He has been the Defence Minister since 2014 (before this, both Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro regularly rotated defence ministers). Padrino Lopez's credibility and influence are so great that he can express opinions that differ from the president's.⁶³

A threat to the wellbeing and security of the armed forces in the event of a change of power remains a major factor of their loyalty. According to Venezuelan expert Rocio San Miguel, 40 percent of army commanders are under personal sanctions.⁶⁴ All of them face the possibility of criminal prosecution if an opposition government comes to power. Power agencies are interested in preserving the current national leadership that guarantees their security.

However, it would be wrong to reduce the government's support by the armed forces to pragmatic considerations alone. There are also *ideological proponents of the national leadership*. When Hugo Chavez came to power, his government started involving the military in political processes and conducted a broad campaign for their education in the spirit of the concept of "21st century socialism."⁶⁵

A wave of purges and resignations swept the army. The government promoted loyal personnel and (under various pretexts) removed officers who were distrustful of its policy from service. The idea of a union between civilians and the military was actively promoted. Typically, General Henry Rangel Silva said in 2010 that the military would not

⁶² EEUU: Los 2.000 generales de Venezuela son "el centro de gravedad" de Maduro // El Diario de Caracas. 07.02.2019. URL: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190207/46286161753/eeuu-los-2000-generales-de-venezuela-son-el-centro-de-gravedad-de-maduro.html>.

⁶³ Barráez S. Padrino López pretende desligarse de los colectivos chavistas y pidió a la Fuerza Armada actuar contra cualquier grupo violent // Infobae. 06.04.2019. URL: <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/04/06/padrino-lopez-pretende-desligarse-de-los-colectivos-chavistas-y-pidio-a-la-fuerza-armada-actuar-contra-cualquier-grupo-violento/>.

⁶⁴ Elementos de una transición integral e incluyente en Venezuela: una visión desde lo local // Caracas, Instituto para las Transiciones Integrales (IFIT). 2020.

⁶⁵ Пятаков А. Переизбрание президента: параллели, парадоксы, перспективы // Латинская Америка. №8, 2018. С. 5–22.

recognise the opposition's potential advent to power.⁶⁶ Later on, he was appointed defence minister.

The influence of the Cuban leadership is another factor explaining the commitment of the armed forces to the authorities. The press writes about the presence of military advisers from the Island of Freedom in the country. Opposition representatives and White House officials often mention this circumstance. Secretary of State in the Donald Trump administration Mike Pompeo noted that there were up to 20,000 Cuban advisers in Venezuela.⁶⁷

However, even considering that this figure is hugely overstated and that similar statements are usually made for propaganda purposes, it is necessary to admit that there is a Cuban influence. Cuba's requirements for Venezuelan energy sources do not allow it to stand apart from the political crisis. Havana is closely following the developments in the Bolivarian Republic, supporting the Maduro government.

In addition, there are units of *Bolivarian Militia*⁶⁸ that were established during the Chavez administration. They were made up of volunteers, supporters of "21st century socialism." To some extent, the appearance of this structure reflected the government's mistrust of the military. The number of these units has been increasing steadily. According to Maduro, in 2020, the Bolivarian Militia's personnel amounted to 3.3 million people.⁶⁹

The multitude of the Bolivarian Militia is explained not only by the fascination of its members with the idea of "21st century socialism." People could also enter it for pragmatic reasons, trying to gain access to

⁶⁶ Chávez asciende al militar que sugirió desconocer el triunfo de la oposición // El Mundo. 12.11.2020. URL: <https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/11/12/venezuela/1289585100.html>.

⁶⁷ Adams D. Cuba's «army» in Venezuela: doctors or soldiers? // Univision. 22.04.2019. URL: <https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/cubas-army-in-venezuela-doctors-or-soldiers>.

⁶⁸ Decreto N° 8.096, mediante el cual se dicta el Decreto con Rango, Valor y Fuerza de Ley Orgánica de Reforma de la Ley Orgánica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana // 09.03.2011. URL: <https://vendata.org/site/storage/otrasFuentes/Ley%20Org%C3%A1nica%20de%20la%20Fuerza%20Armada%20Nacional%20Bolivariana.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Hernández C. Maduro incorpora la Milicia Bolivariana a la Fuerza Armada // Infodefensa. 10.02.2020. URL: <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/3127881/maduro-incorpora-milicia-bolivariana-fuerza-armada>.

subsidised goods and food. Indicatively, a mere 10 percent of the militia's members went through real combat training.⁷⁰ Rocio San Miguel believes that the real militia reserves do not exceed 20,000 people.⁷¹ The people who received access to arms are supporting the government for the time being but their loyalty cannot be guaranteed if the economic situation deteriorates.

Food security

A decline in the living standards of ordinary Venezuelans due to the grievous economic crisis has made them dependent on the government for food distribution. This instrument of waging political struggle and enhancing public support works very well during the shortage of prime necessities. On the eve of the presidential elections in 2018, the Maduro administration provided the low-income strata with a food package that included rice, macaroni and canned goods. It became the main source of food for 15 percent of the people.⁷²

To mobilise supporters, the authorities are using Homeland IDs – electronic cards that allow their holders to receive subsidised food packages. It was rumoured that membership cards of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela⁷³ had a similar function. As a result, its membership increased to 7.6 million people in 2020⁷⁴ although a mere 4.3 million voted for that party at the end of the same year.⁷⁵ Since the partial liberalisation of prices and currencies, food distribution has lost some of its political weight, but it still plays an important role in the confrontation.

⁷⁰ Venezuela's Military Enigma // International Crisis Group. 16.09.2020. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/039-venezuelas-military-enigma>.

⁷¹ Milicia, el ejército popular al servicio de Maduro // El País. 31.03.2019.

⁷² En Venezuela, el régimen de Maduro utilizó el hambre para obtener votos // Shareamerica. 24.01.2019. URL: <https://share.america.gov/es/en-venezuela-el-regimen-de-maduro-utiliza-el-hambre-para-obtener-votos/>.

⁷³ Пятаков А. Переизбрание президента: параллели, парадоксы, перспективы // Латинская Америка. №8, 2018. С. 5–22.

⁷⁴ PSUV incrementa su militancia en 1 millón 174 mil nuevos inscritos// Revolucionaria. 02.03.2020. URL: <https://www.vtv.gob.ve/psuv-incrementa-militancia-1-millon-174-mil-inscritos//>.

⁷⁵ Consejo Nacional Electoral 2020 // Asamblea Nacional. URL: <https://www2.cne.gob.ve/an2020>.

Consolidation of society under sanctions

Paradoxically, the sanctions of the collective West have helped consolidate Venezuelan society. Despite their scale and severity (in recent years, practically all possible restrictions have been imposed on Venezuela), the United States and its allies have failed to reduce the regime's reserves of strength.

The country was hardest hit by the restrictions on its oil industry. Washington had to sustain serious losses to implement this initiative. It had a damaging effect on American plants located on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which were customised to process heavy fuel brands.⁷⁶

Bans on transactions with Venezuelan securities hindered the ability of the Chavistas to cover budget shortfalls by selling national assets and finance the national debt. Restrictions were imposed on El Petro cryptocurrency, the gold mining industry and transactions of the Central Bank. Venezuelan accounts in foreign banks were frozen.⁷⁷

As mentioned, sanctions increased the dependence of the already destitute people on the government and its food subsidies. However, at the same time, they allowed the Maduro administration to shift part of the blame for the bad domestic situation onto Washington. In public perception, restrictions remain a serious obstacle to economic development and the normalisation of public life. A considerable part of the opposition favours their removal. Thus, in the middle of April of this year, a number of Venezuelan public figures wrote an open letter to the Joe Biden administration with an appeal for the restrictions to be lifted.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Жуков С., Резникова О. Венесуэла на мировом рынке нефти // Мировая экономика и международные отношения. № 10, 2018. С. 80–87.

⁷⁷ «Трамп, разблокируй Венесуэлу!» Пресс-конференция Чрезвычайного и Полномочного Посла Боливарианской Республики Венесуэла в России Карлоса Рафаэля Фариа Тортосы // Международная жизнь. 03.06.2019. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/22778>.

⁷⁸ Alí López O. Is Venezuela «Fixed»? Despite Recovery, Sanctions Leave Lasting Impact // Nacla. 06.07.2022. URL: <https://nacla.org/venezuela-fixed-despite-recovery-sanctions-leave-lasting-impact>.

Washington also failed to split Venezuela's elites. In January 2021, the outgoing Donald Trump administration imposed 166 sanctions on officials and people linked with the Bolivarian government.⁷⁹ These restrictions, acting as "black marks," are fraught with a threat of criminal persecution in the event of regime change. The functionaries that fell under restrictions are not striving to side with the opposition or cooperate with the countries of the collective West.

Split in the opposition

Lack of unity in the opposition is playing into the government's hands. Maduro's disparate opponents represent left, centrist and right political forces with different views on the country's development, its foreign policy and methods of struggle for power.⁸⁰ The creation of a single coalition – the Democratic Unity Round Table (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD*) – did not remove the contradictions. They merely intensified as the confrontation dragged on, preventing the drafting and adoption of consolidated decisions.

The absence of a common approach prevented the government's opponents from taking part in the parliamentary elections in December 2020. The boycott of the election campaign weakened the Chavista opponents and allowed the United Socialist Party of Venezuela to regain its control of the National Assembly. This tangibly reduced the role of Juan Guaidó. Deprived of the legal grounds to claim the role of the interim president,⁸¹ he lost most of his international support. His rankings fell from 60 percent⁸² in March 2019 to 15 percent in

⁷⁹ Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions // Congressional Research Service. 23.05.2022. URL: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10715.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Iwanowski Z. W. Partidos Políticos de Venezuela en las Condiciones de la Polarización // Iberoamerica. Nº4, 2018. P. 27–52.

⁸¹ The opposition claimed that Nicolás Maduro's second presidential mandate was illegitimate. In such cases, Article 233 of the country's Constitution envisages transfer of power to the speaker of the parliament (Juan Guaidó held this position in 2019–2021).

⁸² Twitter de Francisco J. Monaldi // 02.03.2019. URL: <https://twitter.com/fmonaldi/status/1101893032540962816>.

January 2022, which is comparable with the popularity of the country's current president.⁸³ He is fifth on the list of the most popular opposition figures after Manuel Rosales, Henrique Capriles, Maria Machado and Leopoldo Lopez.⁸⁴

In the meantime, Nicolás Maduro has strengthened his positions on the other side of the barricades. He turned out to be the number one compromise figure with the legitimacy of Chavez's successor. The risk of the opposition coming to power compelled the Venezuelan elite to rally around the president. In addition, the position of Maduro's main rival Diosdado Cabello weakened. The second most important politician of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, he lost all government posts, keeping only his position as the ruling party's Vice-President.

The party also became stronger. It enhanced its electoral positions. Despite the apathy of voters in the country (over 48 percent of them do not support any political organisation), the United Socialist Party of Venezuela remains the most popular force with a rating of 20 percent.⁸⁵

Outside support

Foreign assistance, especially from Russia and China, is very important for the Venezuelan authorities. Beijing reaffirmed its recognition of the Maduro government and denounced the interference in the domestic affairs of that Latin American country.⁸⁶ Caracas was allowed to delay the repayment of its external debt. US sanctions compelled

⁸³ State win for Venezuela's opposition masks deeper problems // Aljazeera. 01.11.2022. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/11/out-of-options-venezuela-opposition-struggles-to-unseat-maduro>.

⁸⁴ Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022. URL: <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>

⁸⁵ Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022. URL: <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>

⁸⁶ Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China // 01.24.2019. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1632218.shtml.

China to temporarily stop buying Venezuelan hydrocarbons but it began purchasing them again in 2020.⁸⁷ Russia has also provided financial and humanitarian assistance to Venezuela. It sent the Bolivarian Republic 150,000 tonnes of wheat and a consignment of in-demand medications.⁸⁸ Both states are providing a considerable degree of help to Caracas in overcoming the negative effect of restrictions and providing the country with moral support.

It is also important to consider the steps taken by Iran and Turkey in support of Venezuela. In the past few years, they have substantially expanded the range of their cooperation with the Bolivarian Republic. Thus, when Maduro was under foreign pressure, Ankara did much to help Venezuela obviate sanctions,⁸⁹ and bought consignments of oil and scrap metal from it.⁹⁰ Tehran sent tankers with fuel to Venezuela. These shipments against the backdrop of US threats and risks of the seizure of ships by the US Navy,⁹¹ made up for the shortage of fuel to some extent.

After the start of the special military operation in Ukraine in 2022, Caracas received a respite from outside pressure because the United States switched its attention to Russia. Countries of the collective West became interested in oil supplies from Venezuela. Thus, for the first time since the beginning of the crisis, the Maduro administration received room for manoeuvre, which allowed it to interact with all states.

⁸⁷ Cohen L., Parraga M. Exclusive: Venezuela resumes direct oil shipments to China despite U.S. sanctions // Reuters. 27.11.2020. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-oil-china-exclusive-idUSKBN287031>.

⁸⁸ Mélik-Bagdasárov S. 75º Aniversario del establecimiento de relaciones diplomáticas entre Rusia y Venezuela // El Universal. 14.03.2020. URL: <https://www.eluniversal.com/internacional/64394/75-aniversario-del-establecimiento-de-relaciones-diplomaticas-entre-rusia-y-venezuela>.

⁸⁹ Mysterious Turkish firm helped Maduro move \$900 Million in gold // Bloomberg. 08.02.2019. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-08/mysterious-turkish-firm-helped-maduro-move-900-million-in-gold>.

⁹⁰ Turkey buys over 25,000 tons of scrap metal from Venezuela // Ahval. 16.11.2019. URL: <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-venezuela/turkey-buys-over-25000-tons-scrap-metal-venezuela>.

⁹¹ Largest U.S. Seizure of Iranian Fuel from Four Tankers // 14.08.2020. URL: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/largest-us-seizure-iranian-fuel-four-tankers>.

This was confirmed by Maduro's long tour of Middle East countries in March 2022. He went to most diverse states – Turkey, Algeria, Qatar, Iran, Kuwait and Azerbaijan. Vice President of Venezuela Delcy Rodriguez visited Moscow at the same time.

The victory of the left-centrist Gustavo Petro in Colombia was a big event capable of influencing the position of the Maduro government. Although he will have to criticise Caracas to win the support of the establishment, his advent to power could ease tensions between the two countries and prompt them to settle disputes at their common border. An important step in this area was the normalisation of bilateral relations in August 2022.

Migration

Migration from Venezuela also became a stabilising instrument for the current government. Until 2018, it was a method of undermining the social base of the opposition. The departure of many people allowed the national leadership to co-opt supporters by offering them the jobs of the people who had left.⁹²

Migration ceased to function as a way of “letting off steam” as the situation deteriorated. Both opposition supporters and pro-government citizens began leaving the country.

Having settled in new places, emigres from Venezuela started rendering considerable financial aid to their homeland. According to some estimates, proceeds from their money transfers are the second largest source of revenue to replenish the budget. Thus, in 2020 alone, this figure was assessed at \$3.5 billion.⁹³

⁹² Venezuelan official suggests migrant crisis is staged to undermine government // The Guardian. 28.08.2018. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/venezuela-diosdado-cabello-refugee-footage-fake>.

⁹³ Orozco M., Klaas K. Money Transfers to Venezuela: Remittance Flows Amidst Evolving Foreign Exchange // The Dialogue. URL: https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-Money-Transfers-to-Venezuela_May-2020-2.pdf.

Readiness for market reforms

It is important to note the readiness of the Maduro government for a number of market reforms. A deep economic crisis and acute confrontation with the domestic opposition compelled the Venezuelan authorities to privatise a certain part of state property, liberalise prices and allow currency exchange. These measures improved the economy according to a number of indicators. Market mechanisms helped Caracas reduce its budget deficit. Prominent Venezuelan economist Ricardo Hausmann believes this was brought about by price hikes on a number of socially meaningful goods, primarily petrol, unification of exchange rates and permission to reduce wages to less than \$10 per month.⁹⁴ Despite the painful impact of the reforms on people living in Venezuela, they seriously improved the fiscal system and filled shops with goods.

Risks for the Maduro government and prospects for negotiations

There should be no illusions about the government seizing the initiative in its confrontation with the opposition or about the recovery growth in 2022. The domestic political situation remains tense. Nicolás Maduro does not have enough public support either to achieve political stabilisation or to establish productive communication with the people. Socio-economic indicators leave much to be desired. The poverty level is still critically high, reaching more than 94 percent

⁹⁴ Has Venezuela's Economy Started to Turn a Corner? // The Dialogue. 18.04.2018. URL: <https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/has-venezuelas-economy-started-to-turn-a-corner/>.

according to a study by *Encovi*, in 2021.⁹⁵ Even if these figures are hugely exaggerated, they still point to a deep social malaise in the country. Some 71.4 percent of Venezuelans doubt the current administration's ability to improve its economic performance and 16 percent are going to emigrate.⁹⁶

Further development of Venezuela will largely depend on the actions of the authorities. The Nicolás Maduro government must take into account the risks and challenges it is bound to face.

First, the erosion of the social environment continues and could trigger protests and social discontent. Liberalisation of prices and currency exchange rates made it possible to improve the economy to a certain extent but dealt a heavy blow to the solvency of the majority of the population. These reforms were criticised by trade unions⁹⁷ and the Communist Party of Venezuela.⁹⁸ In addition, the current privatisation may drive a wedge between the government and its core electorate.

Second, it is impossible to rule out the resumption of US pressure on Caracas. On the one hand, the US government has not changed its goals in the Western Hemisphere. As before, Washington is interested in weakening the influence of antagonistic states that may become a bridgehead for the penetration of the region by global players. On the other hand, Washington may use pressure on Venezuela to increase support on the domestic scene.

Many influential politicians, including Senator Marco Rubio⁹⁹ have already opposed normalisation of relations with the Maduro government.

⁹⁵ Condiciones de vida de los venezolanos : entre emergencia humanitaria y pandemia. ENCOVI 2021 // Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales. URL: https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/6153ad6fb92e4428cada4fb7_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202021%20V1.pdf.

⁹⁶ Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022. URL: <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>

⁹⁷ Panorámica de la fuerza laboral en Venezuela // Poderopedia. 30.04.2019. URL: <https://poderopediave.org/panoramica-de-la-fuerza-laboral-en-venezuela/>.

⁹⁸ ¿Por qué el Partido Comunista de Venezuela se aleja de Maduro? // NUSO. 2021. URL: <https://nuso.org/articulo/el-partido-comunista-de-venezuela-nicolas-maduro/>.

⁹⁹ Senadores de EEUU se oponen a comprar petróleo a la Venezuela de Maduro // France. 24. 09.03.2022. URL: <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220309-senadores-de-eeuu-se-oponen-a-comprar-petr%C3%B3leo-a-la-venezuela-de-maduro>.

Third, as the threat of regime change became less tangible, a resumption of the struggle between the Bolivarian elites became more likely. Venezuelan expert Franz von Berger identified four groups of influence: supporters of Nicolás Maduro, functionaries who placed their bets on Diosdado Cabello, officials supporting Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and (the association of) regional leaders.¹⁰⁰

There is competition within the most numerous group of Maduro supporters. The press writes about the conflict between Hector Rodriguez, Governor of Miranda, on the one hand, and National Assembly Speaker Jorge Rodriguez and Vice President of Venezuela Delcy Rodriguez, on the other.¹⁰¹ Differences between them may weaken cooperation in the government camp and complicate the process of decision-making.

Fourth, financial aid from external forces – big global players and international creditors – are of critical importance to Venezuela. To restore the economy and increase oil output, it must get rid of sanctions and attract foreign investment. These measures are possible only if all participants in the confrontation reach compromise.

Thus, the organisation and conduct of talks with the participation of all forces involved in the political confrontation remains the most acceptable way of settling the crisis. The absence of serious value-ideological contradictions between the parties (the government opponents, many of which are left-wing, borrowed a lot of ideas from Chavistas' social policy) makes it possible to hope for this scenario. Moreover, the majority of opposition-minded Venezuelans stand for parliamentary methods of struggle and change of power by electoral procedures.¹⁰² This circumstance makes the possibility of dialogue more likely.

At the same time, negotiations are taking place in Venezuela in an atmosphere of mistrust. All attempts to conduct consultations have

¹⁰⁰ Von Bergen F. ¿Cómo queda repartido el poder dentro del PSUV luego del 15-O? // El Estímulo. 22.10.2017. URL: <https://elestimulo.com/como-queda-repartido-el-poder-dentro-del-psuv-luego-del-15-o>.

¹⁰¹ Avendaño E. Los Rodríguez que mantienen “trancadas” las negociaciones de Venezuela en Oslo. El Libero. 03.07.2019. URL: <https://ellibero.cl/actualidad/los-rodriguez-que-mantienen-trancadas-las-negociaciones-de-venezuela-en-oslo-2/>.

¹⁰² Delphos. Estudio nacional, mayo 2022. URL: <https://caigaquiencaiga.net/encuesta-delphos-2022-sobre-la-coyuntura-politica-venezolana-que-no-quieren-que-tu-conozcas-veala-aqui/>

ended in failure because the sides are pursuing opposite goals. The government wants to preserve control over decision-making and not to involve the opposition in the process, whereas Maduro opponents are aiming to bring about his resignation. These difficulties hugely reduce the possibility of dialogue. Maduro supporters have repeatedly said it is impossible to revise the results of the 2018 presidential elections, whereas their revision has been the main demand of the opposition. In turn, the latter accused the authorities of using compromise rhetoric to gain time.¹⁰³

Specific peculiarities of the parties do not facilitate talks, either. In 2007, Venezuelan experts Jesus Azcargorta and Yvo Hernandez explained the lack of the government's readiness for compromise as a consequence of the heavy involvement of the military in running the country. They believe this is the reason why political opponents were associated with enemies in both the government and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.¹⁰⁴ This strong judgment helps explain why the Chavistas are not ready for concessions today.

The government's opponents are faced with the problem that there has been no universally recognised leader since Juan Guaidó lost this status. Nor do they have any alliance to represent the entire spectrum of the opposition during negotiations. This prevents the drafting of common approaches to national dialogue or any vision of Venezuela's future development.

All parties to the conflict will have to make big concessions to conduct talks and reach agreements. National reconciliation is just the first step in finding a way out of the deep crisis. It should be followed by economic assistance from outside forces. It is necessary to pay much attention to numerous Venezuelan migrants in Latin America. Oil production recovery and improvement of the humanitarian situation in the Bolivarian Republic will become important goals.

¹⁰³ Maduro juega con los tiempos en negociación en Barbados // La Razon. 08.08.2019. URL: <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/maduro-suspende-el-dialogo-con-la-oposicion-en-barbados-OD24505308/>.

¹⁰⁴ Azcargorta J., Hernández I. PSUV: ¿Partido hegemónico o partido único? // Temas de Coyuntura. Nº 56, 2007. P. 7–23.

If the crisis scenario takes a bad turn and the sides do not reach compromise, the conflict will become worse and the differences between the government and the opposition will grow stronger. This is fraught with the aggravation of the humanitarian situation and a risk of a direct clash between the confronting forces. In this event, it would be impossible to rule out the emergence of the military on the political scene and a social uprising.

Conclusion


The acute socio-political crisis has launched the transformation of the political system in Venezuela and changed the methods of ruling the country. The policy of meeting the needs of the broad masses was replaced with a stake on officials and the military. The government institutions that were weak during the Hugo Chavez presidency, lost all meaning. The fierce confrontation prompted the government and the opposition to go beyond the constitutional bounds and appeal to external forces.

The stability of the country's political system leaves much to be desired. It is influenced by economic setbacks and domestic differences that are negatively affecting living standards. At the same time, the Maduro government has preserved a considerable reserve of strength, which allows it to cope with the pressure from the opposition and external forces. Authoritarian trends (that emerged during the Chavez presidency) have allowed the executive government to control other branches of power, the distribution of food and other social benefits and the security agencies. These resources cannot normalise public life but they are still enough to keep the regime afloat.

With a good combination of circumstances, the Maduro administration will be able to hold onto power in the country for a fairly long time but it cannot achieve civil reconciliation and economic recovery without serious concessions. A compromise scenario is still

the best way of settling contradictions. Only on condition of restoring government institutions (this primarily implies the need to observe the rules of the game, follow electoral procedures and abide by the letter and spirit of the Constitution) will the sides be able to trust each other. The government will be ready for a potential defeat at elections, while its opponents will renounce their attempts to dismiss the current president.

The Maduro government's efforts to improve the country's manageability is an important component of its political stability. Being subjected to pressure by the collective West, Russia should also focus on this aspect. Unlike the Venezuelan authorities that often resort to authoritarian instruments, our country should develop institutions and intensify communication between society and the state.

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