

Venezuela from Chávez to Maduro: State Capacity, Economic Collapse, and the Re-Shaping of US' Regional Strategy*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Venezuela's deepening political, economic, and social crisis since the Chávez era through a holistic perspective, focusing on the historical background and regional impacts of the ongoing situation. The main aim of the study is to assess the effects of oil revenue-driven populist distribution, processes of authoritarian consolidation, structural causes of economic collapse, and the mass migration these factors have triggered across Latin America. The article addresses the following research questions: first, through which processes did state capacity collapse in Venezuela? Second, what continuities and ruptures between the Chávez and Maduro eras have determined the current crisis? Third, how has the relationship between economic collapse and mass migration manifested at institutional and social levels? Fourth, in what ways did the US' maximum pressure strategy during the Trump administration internationalize the crisis and intensify geo-political rivalry? And finally, what potential scenarios exist for Venezuela under current conditions? The evidence shows that the Venezuelan crisis has assumed a hybrid character, generating consequences at national, regional, and global levels. This study asserts that resolution is possible only through multilateral diplomatic mechanisms, comprehensive economic reconstruction, and integrated migration management policies. Furthermore, it underlines that the relationship between the United States' historical interventionist practices and the contemporary multipolar geopolitical environment is fundamental in forming Venezuela's future.

Keywords: Venezuelan Crisis, The Chávez-Maduro Era, Authoritarianism, US Foreign Policy, Monroe Doctrine.

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Chávez'den Maduro'ya Venezuela: Devlet Kapasitesi, Ekonomik Çöküş ve ABD'nin Bölgesel Stratejisinin Yeniden Şekillenmesi

ÖZ

Bu makale, Chávez döneminden bu yana derinleşen Venezuela'nın siyasi, ekonomik ve sosyal krizini, ülkenin mevcut durumunun tarihsel kökenlerini ve bölgesel etkilerini analiz eden bütüncül bir çerçevede incelemektedir. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, petrol gelirlerine dayalı populist yeniden dağıtım mekanizmalarının, otoriter konsolidasyon süreçlerinin, ekonomik çöküşün yapısal nedenlerinin ve tüm bu bileşenlerin tetiklediği kitlesel göçün Latin Amerika'daki etkisini incelemektir. Bu bağlamda, makale şu sorulara cevap aramaktadır: 1) Venezuela'da devlet kapasitesi nasıl ve hangi

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süreçlerle çöktü? 2) Chávez ve Maduro dönemleri arasındaki hangi süreklilikler ve kopmalar mevcut krizi şekillendirdi? 3) Ekonomik çöküş ve kitlesel göç arasındaki ilişki kurumsal ve toplumsal düzeylerde nasıl görünür hale geldi? 4) Trump döneminde ABD tarafından benimsenen azami baskı stratejisi krizi nasıl uluslararasılaştırdı ve jeopolitik rekabeti nasıl derinleştirdi? 5) Mevcut koşullar altında Venezuela için ortaya çıkan potansiyel senaryolar nelerdir? Makale, bulgularında Venezuela krizinin hibrit bir nitelik kazandığını ve yalnızca ulusal değil, bölgesel ve küresel düzeylerde de sonuçlar doğurduğunu göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, çalışma temel argümanı krizin çözümünün ancak çok taraflı diplomatik mekanizmalar, kapsamlı ekonomik yeniden yapılanma programları ve göç yönetimine odaklanan bütüncül politikalar yoluyla mümkün olduğudur. Çalışma ayrıca ABD'nin tarihsel müdahale uygulamaları ile mevcut çok kutuplu jeopolitik ortam arasındaki gerilimin Venezuela'nın geleceğini belirlemede kritik bir rol oynadığını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Venezuela Krizi, Chávez-Maduro Dönemi, Otoriterlik, ABD Dış Politikası, Monroe Doktrini.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2006, a new and unprecedented turning point occurred in the Venezuelan crisis. On January 3, 2026, the United States, under the Trump administration, launched a specifically targeted military operation (namely, Operation Absolute Resolve) in northern Caracas, arresting then-President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and taking them to the US soil. This intervention involved coordinated assault and landing operations by special forces such as Delta Force, as well as US air and ground forces. Venezuela's air defence systems were suppressed as part of the operation, and brief clashes occurred with Maduro's security forces, after which it was announced that Maduro had been apprehended and transferred to New York to face federal charges (Cano et al., 2026). This was a bold move that marked a major rupture not only in Venezuelan history but also in the existing international order. While the US administration justified such actions with charges of combating narcotics and terrorism against Maduro and his inner circle, international legal experts emphasized that such a cross-border military intervention rendered the legal basis for arresting the leader of a sovereign state questionable (McKelvie, 2026). The operation not only brought the historical legacy of the Monroe Doctrine back to the forefront in Latin America but also served as a concrete example of how the internal collapse of state capacity interacts with external military pressure in the regional geopolitical context.

Venezuela has undergone one of the most complicated political and economic crises in Latin America over the past quarter-century (since the ascension of Hugo Chávez to power in 1998); representing not only a governmental management failure but also a structural transformation shaped by regional migration and global geopolitical competition. Venezuela, a country once

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regarded as a stable democracy (McCoy & Myers, 2008; Peeler, 2014), entered a new era with the ascension of Hugo Chávez to power in 1998. Chávez's presidency in Venezuela was marked by the restructuring of the state capacity, consolidation of executive power, and the institutionalization of a populist, oil-based development model. Although this new approach yielded short-term improvements in reducing poverty and elevating social inclusion, it ultimately exacerbated structural challenges, including limited economic diversification, diminished institutional autonomy and heightened politicization of the state apparatus (Corrales & Penfold, 2015; Ellner, 2010). This study offers an in-depth analysis of the historical roots of the country's deepening crisis since 2008 and examines the mass migration it has triggered across the Latin American region. The study points out that Venezuela, previously a model of consolidated democracy (Çatalbaş, 2022; Peeler, 2014), has increasingly become fragile due to institutional disintegration and the narrowing of its economic base to a single sector (the oil industry). Notably, the country's heavy reliance on oil revenues serves as an example of the resource curse (Çatalbaş, 2022, p. 94; Karl, 1997).

The populist distribution mechanisms of the Chávez era produced short-term gains in prosperity but impeded economic diversification (Neuman, 2022). The politicization of PDVSA undermined institutional efficiency, and the 2008 global financial crisis, which originated in the USA as the leading market, along with the sharp decline in oil prices in the following years, exposed and underlined these structural vulnerabilities. Under Nicolas Maduro, authoritarian consolidation has resulted in institutional dysfunction, the suspension of the rule of law, and the heightened politicization of security forces (mainly the army). Consequently, Venezuela is frequently categorized as a failed state in academic literature (Çatalbaş, 2022, p. 98; Ellis, 2017).

Pervasive economic collapse, hyper-inflation, food and basic goods shortages (Doocy et al., 2019; Roht-Arriaza & Martínez, 2019, p. 14), the almost total breakdown of the healthcare system (Paniz-Mondolfi et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Morales et al., 2019, p. 1), and escalating violence on the streets (Freitez, 2011, p. 19; Polga-Hecimovich, 2019, p. 190) have compelled large segments of the population to migrate (Çatalbaş, 2022). This population movement exhibits a country evacuation dynamic, indicating that migration has shifted from an individual coping strategy to a collective survival mechanism.

The economic collapse in Venezuela has occurred in parallel with institutional disintegration in the political sphere. The questionable credibility of electoral processes, the dysfunction of the legislative and judicial branches relative to the executive, and the restructuring of the security apparatus to ensure regime loyalty support the classification of Venezuela as a competitive authoritarian regime as defined by Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way (2010). Consistent with Joel S. Migdal's (2020) 'strong society/weak state' analysis, the erosion of institutional capacity has resulted in the state's inability to provide public services and the growing dependence on informal networks to sustain social order. The breakdown of health, education, and security systems has further intensified the humanitarian crisis.

The Venezuelan crisis serves as a prominent example of forced migration resulting from the collapse of state capacity, a phenomenon increasingly addressed in contemporary migration literature since the 2010s (Ellis, 2017; Freier & Parent, 2019; Freitez, 2011; Rocha et al., 2022). Initially motivated by compelling economic factors, individual migration has evolved into a mass and regional population movements; that is to say millions of Venezuelans have relocated to other Latin American countries, particularly to Colombia, as well as the Caribbean basin (Freier & Parent, 2019; UNHCR, 2019). This shift indicates that migration is no longer simply an economic decision but a survival strategy amid political and institutional collapse. The Venezuelan case thus provides a concrete illustration of the inter-connections among state capacity, authoritarianism, and forced migration.

The international dimension of the Venezuelan crisis intensified during the Trump administration as the United States implemented a maximum pressure strategy. Economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation transformed the crisis from an internal mal-governance issue into an international problem, considering the US tradition of political and military intervention in Latin America (Grandin, 2013). In response, the Maduro administration has since sought to expand its maneuvering space in the multipolar international system by strengthening the country's ties with Russia, China, Iran, and even Türkiye, positioning Venezuela at the centre of today's geopolitical debates (Ellis, 2012; Mijares, 2017).

This study employs a comparative historical sociological methodology with a descriptive approach to address its central research questions as follows: What historical processes precipitated the collapse of state capacity in Venezuela? Which continuities and ruptures between Chávez and

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Maduro eras have shaped the current crisis? How has the relationship between economic collapse and mass migration manifested at institutional and social levels? In what ways did the maximum pressure strategy of the US during the Trump administration internationalize the crisis and intensify geo-political competition? What are the most prominent scenarios for Venezuela under current conditions? Accordingly, the article conceptualizes the Venezuelan crisis as both a case of contemporary political instability and a structural phenomenon grounded in the long-term erosion of state capacity, authoritarian regime resilience, and the dynamics of a multipolar world order. It offers a holistic framework for the literature by analyzing the Venezuelan crisis not only in terms of democratic regression or economic collapse, but also through the interaction between the erosion of state capacity and external pressure. By specifically including the military intervention of January 3, 2026, in its analysis, this work makes a unique contribution, demonstrating how external military pressure can produce regime resilience rather than regime change in authoritarian contexts.

Methodology

This study, using a descriptive comparative historical sociological approach, explains the accelerating transformation of the political system, erosion of state capacity, and institutional processes of authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela since the Chávez era. The article draws on classical literature in the social sciences, examining long-term transformations in state capacity and the evolution of regime typologies. In this regard, Charles Tilly's (1992) approach to the historical processes which determine state formation and capacity, state centric analysis of Theda Skocpol (1985) emphasizing state autonomy and institutional integrity, Joel S. Migdal's (2020) theoretical framework on fragmented state structures, and typology of competitive authoritarianism developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) constitute the fundamental reference points of the analysis of this article. This theoretical and conceptual framework enables us to understand and evaluate Venezuela's structural vulnerabilities not only as a result of the choices made by current political actors but also as a consequence of historical and political processes. This study explicitly adopts three levels of comparison within the comparative historical methodology: vertical historical comparison comes at the first level. Examining the continuity/discontinuity between the Chávez and Maduro administrations. Second, institutional time-series comparison traces how state capacity (economic capacity, security apparatus, bureaucratic integrity, social policy power, etc.) has transformed between 1998 and 2024. Finally, a historical comparison of external interactions

assesses Venezuela's geopolitical position in the context of US intervention in Latin America (the Monroe Doctrine and/or the Big Stick Policy), great-power competition, and the global multipolar setup.

Methodologically, this study is qualitative – drawing on data and analyses from official institutions (such as UNHCR, World Bank), international organizations (the UN), prominent think tanks (eg.: V-Dem and R4V), and previous academic literature. Furthermore, the descriptive method, which offers clarification in nature, was chosen to reveal Venezuela's economic collapse, migration dynamics, political deinstitutionalization and destabilization, and regime resilience through concrete indicators. This approach facilitates matching historical trends to analytical categories, explaining the place of current political developments within the broader historical context. This article, in line with this methodological framework, seeks to answer the aforementioned scholarly questions in the introduction. It brings together the literature on resource curse, rentier state (crony capitalism), and authoritarian resilience, repositioning the Venezuelan case at this theoretical intersection. It also questions the linear model of “repression equals regime collapse” assumed by the literature on external intervention and sanctions, demonstrating that this relationship can produce conditional and counterproductive effects. Although focused on Venezuela, this study offers a framework for understanding other existing examples globally.

Political, Economic, and Social Transformation in Venezuela in the 21st Century

From the early 1990s onward, deepening economic inequalities, corruption scandals, and the crisis of party-based political representation eroded the legitimacy of the system among society in Venezuela – paving the way for the rise of Hugo Chávez. A former military officer, Chávez rose to public attention by leading two failed military coup attempts in 1992.¹ Despite his failures as a coup plotter, he quickly became an anti-establishment figure for a broad segment of society who resented neoliberal orthodoxy (Ellner, 2008; Lopez Maya, 2011). With his rising influence and charisma in politics, then President Rafael Caldera pardoned him before fulfilling his time in prison. After being pardoned in 1994, Chávez turned to civilian politics by forming his party. With the support of his Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento Quinta Republica - MQR), he came to power in the 1998 presidential elections, centralizing his rhetoric against poverty, inequality, and

¹ After the first coup attempt as a colonel Chávez was imprisoned but he led the second military coup attempt in the prison through the cadres loyal to him.

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corruption (Cannon, 2010; Gott, 2011; Neuman, 2022). A new constitution, drafted in the following year after his election, expanded presidential powers, centralized the state structure, and strengthened the mechanisms of plebiscitary democracy, forming the institutional foundation of the Chávez era (Hawkins, 2010).

Chávez's discourse favored the poor segments of the people; hence, his rule was based on a redistributive strategy that heavily depended on oil revenues. This strategy was working at first, when oil prices skyrocketed on the global market, but started failing after the 2008 global financial crisis since he could not diversify the government's resources and/or restructure the country's economic setup. The politicization of PDSVA (Petroleos de Venezuela) and its restructuring with pro-government cadres facilitated the allocation of oil funds to large-scale social programs. These programs, known as *Misiones Bolivarianas* (Bolivarian Missions), provided short-term improvements in areas such as health, education, housing, and food aid to the poor. However, they increased the economy's dependence on a single source of income and undermined long-term fiscal sustainability (Corrales & Penfold, 2015; Monaldi et al., 2021). While rising oil prices in the early 2000s provided Chávez with considerable political maneuverability, the failure to diversify the economy and the deterioration of institutional capacity led to the resource curse, as Terry Lynn Karl (1997) posits, shaping Venezuela's structural fate. In this context, Chávez's populist (Uslu, 2019) leadership gradually exhibited authoritarian tendencies: rhetoric that marginalized the opposition, enhanced media control, and subordinated the judiciary to the executive branch of the government, as well as the 2009 referendum² abolishing presidential term limits which accelerated the personalization of the power (Çatalbaş, 2022, pp. 94-96; Hawkins, 2010; Neuman, 2022).

²It is important to remind readers here that the presidential term limit which was lifted in the 2009 Constitutional Referendum was actually introduced by Chávez himself in 1999. Furthermore, when a referendum held in 2007 for the same purpose - to remove the presidential term limit - was rejected by the people, Chávez said "por ahora, no pudimos" (for now, we couldn't), a phrase he uttered after his failed coup attempt while in the military in 1992.

Map: 1. Regional Distribution of Venezuelan Immigrants³



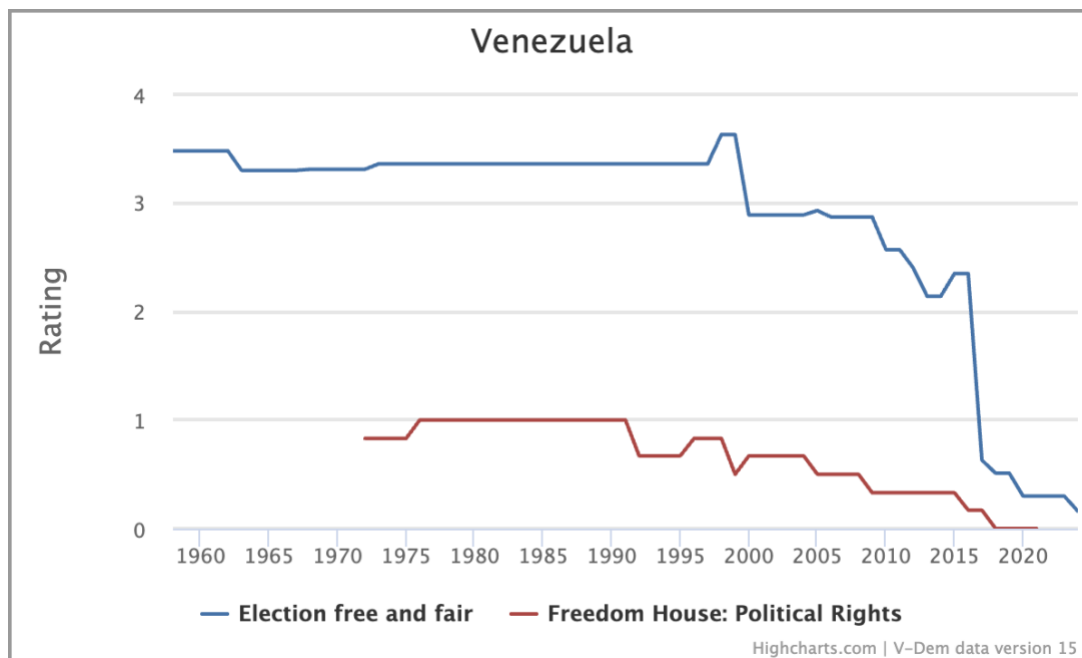
Following Chávez's death from cancer in 2013, Nicolás Maduro, who ascended to power with Chávez's endorsement, sought to replace the charismatic leadership with a weaker basis of political legitimacy, grounding his rule largely in the continuity of the Chavismo legacy. However, when Maduro came to power, the Venezuelan economy was already sliding into a severe crisis due to the decline in oil prices and the inefficiency of PDSVA. Between 1998 and 2020, the dramatic decline in oil production, leading to one of the worst economic collapses in modern history (Hausmann & Rodriguez, 2021; Neuman, 2022). The widespread inaccessibility of basic foods and medicines led to dramatic weight loss among the people, giving rise to the concept known as the Maduro Diet (Forero, 2017). During the same period, the collapse of the healthcare system led to the resurgence of diseases (some of which had once been eradicated from society) such as measles,

³(URL1): According to the data, the total number of Venezuelan immigrants in the Region exceeds 6.7 million.

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malaria, typhoid, and cholera. The near-total dysfunction of the state apparatus in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the public health crisis (Correa-Salazar & Amon, 2020; Paniz-Mondolfi et al., 2019).

Figure: 1. V-Dem Scores for Free Elections and Democratic Rights⁴



The most distinctive feature of the Maduro era is the institutionalization of authoritarianism. The transformation of the military into a decisive political actor, the appointment of hundreds of new generals, and the appointment of military elites to key economic policy positions have served as strategies to reinforce regime loyalty (Trinkunas, 2000). At the same time, allegations of a *Cartel de los Soles* (Cartel/Mob of the Suns) in which segments of the state apparatus are linked to the international drug trade have reinforced the literature suggesting that the regime has become a mafia and led to Venezuela's further isolation in the international system (Farah, 2012; Polga-Hecimovich, 2019). Despite Maduro's official victory with 67 percent of the vote in the 2018 presidential elections, both domestic opposition and international observers deemed him illegitimate (Çatalbaş, 2022, p. 97). Low voter turnout rates and allegations of systematic irregularities triggered a historic legitimacy crisis in Venezuela. Consequently, President of the

⁴V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy). The author created the figure by using the V-Dem online datasets. The Author has taken 1958, the year the military coup ended in Venezuela, as his starting point.

National Assembly Juan Guaidó's self-proclaimed interim presidency in 2019 plunged the country into a two-pronged power struggle (Akgemci, 2020, p. 250). The pressure exerted on Maduro by regional and global actors such as the US, the EU, and the OAS (Organization of American States), combined with support from Russia and China, deepened the crisis' geo-political dimension (Ellis, 2012; Mijares, 2017).

The transformation in Venezuela can also be read through the lens of the now-classical "resource curse" literature, which examines the relationship between dependence on natural resources and political institutionalization. Terry Lynn Karl's (1997) observation that rentier state structures in oil-rich countries produce institutional fragility is clearly confirmed in the Venezuelan case: the redistribution model based on oil revenues produced political legitimacy in the short term; however, it weakened economic diversification and bureaucratic capacity. Michael L. Ross's (2012) findings that resource wealth can strengthen authoritarian tendencies also align with the Venezuelan experience, particularly in the context of the centralization of executive power and the erosion of accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Acemoglu and Robinson's (2012) distinction between inclusive and exclusive institutions shows that the exclusionary institutional structure based on oil rent produces economic fragility and political instability in the long term. In this context, Venezuela can be considered a case in which oil revenues initially supported political stability, but as structural dependence deepened, they eroded state capacity, paving the way for the reproduction of authoritarian resilience under crisis conditions.

This long-term process has created a threefold transformation in Venezuela. First, democratic institutions have been systematically eroded, checks and balances have been eliminated, and the presidential system has become overly centralized. Second, the economy has experienced a historic collapse due to the failure in non-oil production capacity, the devaluation of the national currency, and the dysfunction of the national oil company, PDSVA. Third, the social structure has irreversibly been disrupted by mass migration, the decline in human capital, the strengthening of criminal organizations, and the precariousness of daily life. Today, Venezuela is discussed in the literature with concepts such as failed state (Ellis, 2012), mafia state (McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2022; Polga-Hecimovich, 2019), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 16), and petro-state collapse (Mijares, 2022). It is treated as an exceptional case in both academic and international policy analyses.

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The Trump Era: the Maximum Pressure Strategy of the USA and Maduro's Responses

Donald Trump's ascension to the US presidency in 2017 led to a fundamental paradigm shift in Washington's policies toward Venezuela and significantly hardened the international dimension of the crisis. The Trump administration went beyond the limited sanctions imposed in previous periods and adopted an approach explicitly aimed at regime change, referred to in the literature as the maximum pressure strategy (Corrales, 2020, p. 40; Schweers, 2021; Smilde & Ramsey, 2020, p. 159). Fundamental to this strategy were restricting the Nicolas Maduro government's access to economic and financial resources, legitimizing the opposition internationally, and financially disabling the regime by targeting oil revenues. As hinted above, the US' recognition of the President of the National Assembly, Juan Guaido, as interim president in 2019 was the most visible example of the diplomatic component of this new policy, Washington has clearly demonstrated its bias in Venezuelan domestic politics (Lowenthal, 2022, p. 105; Smilde & Ramsey, 2020, p. 158).

The Trump administration's economic sanctions were aimed at restricting the Maduro regime's external financing channels. Harsh financial measures against PDSVa, including blocking oil sales revenues and restricting access to the US financial system, targeted the Venezuelan economy's primary source of income (Palacios & Monaldi, 2022). Numerous studies in the academic literature (Lowenthal, 2022, pp. 106-107; Weisbrot & Sachs, 2019) demonstrate that sanctions accelerated the country's economic collapse and indirectly contributed to Maduro's continued hold on power by increasing the internal solidarity of regime elites. This situation points to a dynamic described as the double effect of sanctions: increasing economic isolation did not weaken the regime but rather produced a more authoritarian and externally dependent structure (Corrales & Penfold, 2015).

Another important element of the Trump administration's Venezuela policy is its increasingly assertive and aggressive rhetorical statements, hinting at a direct military intervention as an option (Mijares, 2022; Mora, 2017).⁵ These kinds of statements have clearly demonstrated a

⁵ Donald Trump put this kind of pressure on Venezuela in his both presidential terms. During his first term between 2017 and 2021, there was a strong opposition in the congress against his discourse but in the second term starting in 2025, he has more confidence, experience, and support in the politics. Moreover, the rhetoric that Trump administration uses has a slight difference in his second term. At first, he was referring to a military coup d'état in Venezuela by the Venezuelan military, but in his second term he started implying a

policy shift from the traditional multilateral diplomatic positioning of the US foreign policy and adopted a more aggressive tone, allowing the Maduro government to present itself as the victim of a US-backed regime change operation. This victim rhetoric has reinforced Caracas' external threat narrative, helped Maduro to solidify his cronies within the military and bureaucracy, and expand his repressive security apparatus (Bull & Rosales, 2023, p. 54; Corrales, 2020, p. 42).

During this period, Venezuela's geopolitical orientation has also considerably changed (Lowenthal, 2022; Mijares, 2017, 2022; Rocha et al., 2022). The deepening of economic sanctions led the Maduro government to develop alternative foreign relations; economic and military cooperation (particularly with China, Iran, Russia, and Türkiye) became key components of the regime's survival strategy (Corrales, 2020, pp. 49-50; Handlin, 2016). Russia's military advisory activities and technical support in the energy sector, China's long-term credit mechanisms, and Iran's shipments of refined products strengthened the Maduro government's resilience against Washington's pressures (Corrales, 2020; Smilde & Ramsey, 2020, p. 171). Thus, the Venezuelan crisis ceased to be a mere regional conflict and evolved into a broader geopolitical rivalry between China, (to some extent) Iran, Russia, and the US.

Meanwhile, despite the national opposition's international recognition, President of the National Assembly Juan Guaido's strategy failed, creating a counterdynamic that, in a way, increased Maduro's domestic and international legitimacy. The fragmentation of the opposition, the military's refusal to support regime change, and the failure of external pressure to create expected internal ruptures have demonstrated that Trump-era policy tools have not yielded the desired results (Lowenthal, 2022, p. 107; Smilde & Ramsey, 2020, p. 171). Additionally, the exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis by imposing sanctions has attracted wide criticism from international academic circles (Corrales, 2020; Weisbrot & Sachs, 2019), with many researchers pointing out that sanctions, along with economic collapse, deepen poverty and accelerate mass migration.

Venezuela's multidimensional crisis highlights a complex transformation process shaped not only by domestic political and economic dynamics but also by regional geopolitics and global power relations (Lowenthal, 2022; Mijares, 2017). While the centralized executive model

direct military intervention to topple the Maduro government, which eventually came true but in an unexpected way.

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(bolstered by populist redistributive mechanisms based on oil revenues during the Chávez era) generated social legitimacy in the short term, it hindered economic diversification in the long term by creating a fragile state structure. Under the presidency of Nicolas Maduro, this fragility has deepened, marked by the collapse of the political economy, hyperinflation, institutional weakening, and the reorganization of the security apparatus around loyalty to the regime (McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2022; Mijares, 2022). Thus, Venezuela has become synonymous with concepts such as petro state collapse, competitive authoritarianism, and mafia state. The social consequences of this collapse have become apparent in the transformation of migration from an individual strategy into a societal survival mechanism (Çatalbaş, 2022). The Venezuelan exodus has caused a decline in the country's human capital and the destabilization of regional socio-economic balances. On this point, migration flows from Venezuela to Latin American countries are the result not only of economic pressures but also of a broader context in which daily life is becoming increasingly difficult amid a disintegrating state capacity. The Venezuelan example, which brings together strands of migration theory in the social sciences, has made visible both the economic structural collapse and intersectional elements such as cultural affinity, social networks, and security dynamics.

In Venezuela, the Bolivarian Revolution model (a kind of socialist movement) implemented since the Chávez era has been distinguished by the state's excessive dependence on oil resources, increased state interference in the private sector and market mechanisms, and efforts to restructure civil-military relations. Hugo Chávez developed a vision of a civil-military alliance to reshape the military as a social and ideological element, and the military institutions have assumed an increasingly important role in the political, economic, and social spheres (Strønen, 2016). During this period, the military ceased to be a mere security institution and became a central actor in the country's economic and social policies.

However, under Nicolas Maduro's presidency, this trend deepened; authoritarianism became a fixed feature of the country. The military's position within economic relations and the state bureaucracy was deliberately strengthened in many areas to create more regime-dependent cronies, and individuals with military backgrounds have been appointed to senior positions. This transformation weakened civilian control mechanisms, marginalized democratic institutions, and restructured public administration through a governance model heavily influenced by the military.

Today, voter turnout in the country is at its lowest, and even with a minority attending the elections, confidence in the system has zeroed out.

These institutional transformations have simultaneously deepened social and economic vulnerabilities. Government spending based only on oil revenues has become unsustainable (Neuman, 2022), leading to greater diversification of production and increased reliance upon external resources. The quality of public services has declined, and social state mechanisms have been under huge financial pressure ever since. Adding insult to the injury, the military's increasing weight in the economy, coupled with the withdrawal of the private sector and a decline in financial market confidence, has accelerated the economic collapse (Strønen, 2016).

The international dimension of the crisis has recently gained new momentum, especially with the Trump administration. While the United States' maximum pressure strategy aimed to isolate the Maduro administration economically and politically, it has not produced the expected and desired regime change. Instead, it has led Caracas to deepen its relations with alternative power centers such as China, Iran, Russia, and Türkiye. While the human cost of sanctions has increased, the regime's internal resilience has also been strengthened. This outcome is consistent with the existing social science literature explaining the double impact of sanctions on authoritarian regimes: external pressure can weaken the regime while simultaneously encouraging its controlled introversion and expansion of its security apparatus. In this context, Venezuela has ceased to be merely a national crisis. It has become intertwined with the current repercussions of the Monroe Doctrine (and big-stick policy), which have since shaped the historical US intervention tradition, Venezuela has become the centre of a foreign policy tension line aligned with the historical vulnerabilities of the Caribbean Basin.

Maduro's Departure from the Equation and the Restructuring of Regional Geopolitics

Nicolas Maduro's loss of his central position in Venezuelan politics, or his de facto exit from the political equation after the January 3rd operation, represents not merely a change in leadership but a simultaneous restructuring of the domestic and international dimensions of the Venezuelan crisis. Given the personalized nature of political authority in Venezuela, this development signifies a rupture with potentially profound consequences for the regime's institutional architecture, the reconstruction of state capacity, and the country's international positioning. However, the literature emphasizes that a change in leadership alone does not guarantee the dissolution of authoritarian

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regimes; rather, the security apparatus, economic interest networks, and external support (especially from Russia and China) relationships upon which the regime rests are crucial (Geddes et al., 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

In this context, Maduro's fall from power could bring about three main consequences for Venezuela. First, it theoretically opens up the possibility of exiting a political structure where executive power is centralized and institutional checks and balances are weakened. However, the long-standing erosion of state capacity makes it difficult for such a transition to translate into stable democratic consolidation in the short term (Huntington, 1992; Migdal, 2020; Tilly, 1992). Second, there is the necessity of redefining the role of the military and security bureaucracy within the political system. During the Chávez and Maduro eras, the military became one of the fundamental pillars of the regime's survival. This has emerged as a structural element that prevents the leader's removal from automatically triggering a regime transformation (Corrales & Penfold, 2015). Third, Venezuela's foreign policy orientation needs to be renegotiated, particularly in the context of strategic relationships with China and Russia.

Table: 1. Important Socio-Political Incidents during Chávez and Maduro Eras (1992-2026)

Year	Incident	Explanation	Importance
1992 (February)	Failed coup d'état	Hugo Chávez attempted a coup d'état against Carlos Andres Perez government; failed and imprisoned.	The emergence of Chávez's anti-elite and anti-system discourse; his positioning of armed intervention as a legitimate political tool.
1992 (November)	Second failed coup attempt	Military officers loyal to Chávez attempted a second coup against the same government; failed.	Normalization of militarized political culture in the country.
1994	Pardoning and releasing Chávez by the president Rafael Caldera.	President Rafael Caldera pardoned Chávez in the hope of gaining political advantage from his popular political persona.	Transformation of Chávez from a military figure to a populist political leader.

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1998	Elected president	Hugo Chávez was elected with 56% of the popular votes.	The collapse of bi-partisan system in Venezuela.
1999	New constitution	The Constituent Assembly was established; the Bolivarian constitution was adopted.	Strengthening the executive branch; institutional restructuring.
2002 (April)	Coup attempt against Chávez and brief loss of power	Chávez was suspended from the power for 48 hours, and held hostage; he returned to the post due to internal divisions within the army.	Centralization of regime-military relations; marginalization of the opposition.
2003-2004	Oil strike and confidence referendum	The PDSVA strike was followed by Chávez winning a vote of confidence referendum.	Politicization of the oil industry.
2007-2009	Constitutional referendum (first defeat); Second constitutional referendum	The proposal for an indefinite presidency (removing term limits for the presidency) was rejected by the public in 2007. With the new constitutional referendum in 2009, the term limit for the presidency was removed.	First limitation to the hegemonic political agenda. Institutionalization of authoritarianism.
2013 (March)	Death of Chávez	Hugo Chávez passed away immediately after his re-election for the fourth term.	Transition to bureaucratic authoritarianism from charismatic leadership.
2013 (April)	Controversial elections	Nicolas Maduro won the presidency by 1,5% margin.	Beginning of legitimacy crisis.
2015-2017	Rise of the opposition and wide protests	Opposition won the majority in the constitutional assembly but Maduro administration declared a new pro-regime constitutional assembly; widespread protests began, hundreds of people died.	Conflict between the regime and legislation; Transition to closed authoritarianism from competitive one.
2018-2020	Controversial elections; Guaidó crisis	Opposition boycotted the elections; Opposition-led national assembly	International isolation; Regime proved its durability; Institutional monopoly of power

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		declared Juan Guaido interim president; Western bloc recognized the decision.	become apparent (full-blown dictatorship)
2021-2025	Sanctions and negotiations; Controversial elections	The US imposed extensive sanctions but the EU initiated Mexico parleys meanwhile Maduro regime hijack the elections. A new parliament without opposition was formed.	The situation turned to a frozen crisis in the international arena but authoritarian stability becomes fragile; US pressure becomes aggression.
2026	American intervention; end of Maduro era	The US forces conducted a special operation (Operation Absolute Resolve) only to capture President Nicolas Maduro without further invasion of the country or toppling the government.	Regime survived, Delcy Rodriguez became interim president; Maduro was brought to the US soil.

The regional and global implications of Maduro's departure from the presidency should be considered, especially in light of the intensification of US-China rivalry in Latin America. Venezuela has become one of China's most important energy and financial partners in the Western Hemisphere over the past two decades. This relationship has contributed to Beijing's presence in the region, gaining a symbolic and strategic dimension (Lowenthal, 2022; Mijares, 2017). Therefore, Maduro's removal from the equation has the potential to indirectly affect not only the balance of power in Caracas but also China's long-term positioning in Latin America. However, the existing literature shows that China's influence in the region is too diversified to be reduced to a single country and is spread across the region in the areas of infrastructure, trade, and finance.

At this point, the Panama example (Walker & Tewari, 2026) gains importance as a concrete reflection of the broader US strategy to limit Chinese influence in Latin America. Increased political and legal pressure on the presence of China-linked companies on infrastructure critical to global trade, such as the Panama Canal, reveals that Washington is addressing geo-economic competition in the region from a security perspective. The US diplomatic and political influence over Panama can be read as part of a broader approach to limiting China's role in strategic infrastructure. This situation, consistent with a contemporary interpretation of the Monroe

Doctrine,⁶ demonstrates a strengthening tendency within the US to be intolerant of great-power competition in the Western Hemisphere. Considering the historical foreign policy practices of the United States, the Monroe Doctrine's framework defining the region as the natural sphere of influence of the United States and Theodore Roosevelt's (1901-1909) big stick approach provided the discursive and doctrinal foundations that legitimized the US' long-term military operations – particularly in the Caribbean Basin and Central America (Grandin, 2011, 2013; O'Neal, 1995; Paul, 2004). The interventions in Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and Haiti (1994) are among the most prominent examples of this tradition - reflecting historical practices in which the US combined a discourse of regional stability with military power (Meernik, 2018; O'Neal, 1995).

The most obvious consequence of Maduro's removal from the equation by force is that the political vacuum in Venezuela has led to a redistribution of power among both domestic and external actors. The US intervention can be read as part of the Trump administration's attempt to adapt the Monroe Doctrine to the 21st century. This new adaptation, presented as a revised hegemonic perspective called the "Donroe Doctrine," coined by the New York Post (Long, 2021, pp. 17-18), is seen as a deterrent strategy against China's influence in the region. In this context, Maduro's capture can be interpreted as something that goes beyond merely transforming the Venezuelan regime, serving the US strategy of re-establishing its power and influence over Latin America. However, this also brings new uncertainties for the countries in the region. The intensification of US-China competition through military and geo-economic means puts Latin American states under pressure to choose sides; this creates long-term risks for regional autonomy and stability (Long, 2021, pp. 17-18).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the Venezuelan crisis not only in the context of national political transformations but also as a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by the long-term erosion of state capacity, authoritarian processes, and external pressure mechanisms. Since Chávez's rise to power in 1998, Venezuela has been governed by policies that have increased the centralized control of the state apparatus. This process led to the fragility of the oil-revenue-based economic structure and

⁶The Monroe Doctrine, infamously referred today, essentially arose from Latin American countries striving for independence or newly independent being inspired by the American Revolution in 1776 and seeking financial, military, and political aid from the United States. However, over time, this doctrine led the US to view the region as its own backyard and combined with Theodore Roosevelt's big stick approach, it acquired its current meaning.

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the weakening of inter-institutional checks and balances mechanisms. During the Maduro era, this fragility was compounded by structural breakdowns such as economic collapse, hyper-inflation, and the inability to deliver public services. The absence of democratic oversight mechanisms strengthened executive power while deepening the crisis of social legitimacy. In this context, Venezuela has become one of the examples of a structure that has transformed into an authoritarian one, simultaneously with a systematic weakening of state capacity.

The Venezuelan case, in line with the central thesis of this study, demonstrates that external pressure mechanisms (economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and, most recently, military pressure) did not produce the expected regime change. On the contrary, they unexpectedly increased regime resilience. The military operation codenamed Operation Absolute Resolve, conducted on January 3, 2026, resulted in the capture of incumbent President Nicolas Maduro and his wife by the US Armed Forces, and this intervention elevated the Trump administration's repression strategy to a new level. The subsequent declaration of Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez as interim leader in Venezuela by the regime cadres demonstrates that external intervention went beyond the goal of establishing direct hegemonic control over the regime. However, the operation sparked widespread debate in international legal circles regarding the legitimacy of the arrest of a sovereign state's leader by foreign powers, drawing comparisons to examples such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq. The UN Secretary General and many countries criticized the intervention decision as a violation of international law, while the US defended it as a legitimate measure against criminals.

This historically momentous rupture in the international order illustrates the stark contrast between theoretical expectations and practical outcomes of external repression.⁷ Comparative authoritarianism literature emphasizes that authoritarian regimes survive not only through economic hardship but also through the perception of external threats. External pressure, combined with internal repression and security rhetoric, can strengthen a regime's defensive reflexes. In Venezuela, external pressure, rather than fortifying the internal political opposition, has centralized the regime's security apparatus, redefined political legitimacy, and solidified solidarity within the

⁷As part of scholarly honesty, I have to admit that I did not see the January 3rd operation coming. The very first draft of this paper foresaw a kind of US military intervention but the kind actually happened was beyond my imagination. Hence, I had to revise the paper before its publication processes.

regime's cadres. The various protests within the country after the January 3rd operation, international reactions, and diplomatic contact attempts demonstrate how complex and multi-faceted the solution to the crisis has become.

It is also observed that external pressure tools may reinforce informal and unofficial networks in an environment where the state's capacity is already weakened. This situation aligns with Migdal's 'weak state-strong society' framework, while simultaneously acting as a self-catalyst that increases the capacity of internal power centers to maintain the authoritarian order. The uncertainty in domestic political dynamics following Maduro's capture, the restructuring strategies of regime circles, the loyalty of the security apparatus, and the emergence/rise of new political actors (such as Delcy Rodriguez) indicate not only a change of leadership but also a flexibility of the regime in changing domestic, regional, and international political atmosphere. This perspective interprets the relationship between external pressure and internal regime resilience not merely as opposing forces but as dynamics that mutually reproduce and shape one another.

The consequences of the January 3, 2026 operation have also led to significant transformations in terms of regional balances. The latest US intervention has paved the way for a historical resurgence of military and economic pressure tools in Latin America, through a contemporary reading of the Monroe Doctrine. In response, Russia, China, and many countries in the Global South have criticized the operation as a violation of regional geopolitical norms. Current developments indicate that the transformative interventions of international actors in Venezuela should be considered within the context of Great Power Competition. Consequently, external pressure tools often reproduce authoritarian resilience rather than accelerating democratic transformation.

For policymakers, this study clearly illustrates the limitations of external pressure tools. Tools such as deepening sanctions, external military intervention, and economic isolation, rather than bringing about the expected democratic transformation in regimes where state capacity has already collapsed, may contribute to the reorganization of the regime's instruments of control. Therefore, instead of producing a clear path to regime change, external pressure increases the complexity and multi-layered nature of political transformation. This is not a phenomenon unique to Venezuela; it reveals the need for a broader theoretical and comparative analysis of the relationship between foreign pressure and domestic resilience in authoritarian states. This result

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necessitates considering Venezuela not only within the Latin American context but also in comparison with other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, Africa, and Eurasia. In regimes where state capacity has been severely eroded, the cost of external pressure is often borne not directly by the regime elites, but by society as a whole. This situation, rather than weakening the regime's capacity for repression, can increase social dependence and mechanisms of political control. In the case of Venezuela, although economic collapse limited the state's capacity to provide social welfare, the regime's core support was maintained through networks of political loyalty and the security apparatus. This demonstrates that authoritarian resilience can be explained not only by the concept of a strong state, but sometimes also by a weak but repressive state model.

The comparative literature on authoritarianism shows that authoritarian regimes survive not only through their economic performance and leadership capacity, but also through repression, coalition rule, and perceptions of external threats. In this context, Venezuela serves as a warning sign for the literature on democratization. The collapse of authoritarian regimes depends not only on the intensity of external pressure but also on internal institutional transformations, social organization, and the emergence of alternative political elites. The role of external actors can be decisive in this process; however, this role becomes more meaningful through multilateral strategies that support long-term institutional capacity building and consider societal costs, rather than through military and economic coercion.

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Makale Bilgileri/Article Information

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<i>Çıkar Çatışması:</i>	Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	<i>Conflict of Interest:</i>	The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest.
<i>Yazar Katkı Beyanı:</i>	Çalışmanın tamamı yazar tarafından oluşturulmuştur.	<i>Author Contribution Declaration:</i>	The entire study was created by the author.
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<i>İntihal:</i>	Bu makalede intihal taraması yapılmış ve intihal içermediği teyit edilmiştir. – İntihal.Net	<i>Plagiarism:</i>	This article has been scanned for plagiarism and it has been confirmed that it does not contain plagiarism. – İntihal.Net