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VENEZUELA, REGIONAL ACTORS AND A COMPROMISED WEST

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Famine, shortages, aggravated child mortality, bloody repression, widespread corruption, migration exodus, criminal mafias embedded into the social texture, supply networks and political systems: over the years, all such phenomena have been showing Venezuela to be a country in distress. In this framework, worrying images and dramatic accounts emerging at a dizzying pace combine with a feeling of resignation and a sense of *déjà vu*.

The paradox of Venezuela, testing ground par excellence for 21st century socialism and home to the world's most abundant oil reserves, is enduring: What does this worn out country represent? How could it get to this point without Western democracies taking action to alleviate damages? Are we dealing with a crisis that progressively worsens, while becoming more and more protracted? If so, for how long? Maybe we would find more answers by wondering 'how far' this crisis could go.

A number of factors contribute to redefining the boundaries of Venezuela's crisis: econo-

mies polluted by trafficking and money laundering, nation-states embarrassed by a government that retains dodgy links with authoritarian, extremist and criminal allies, and an unprecedented migration wave that unquestionably depicts the humanitarian emergency the country is going through.

On the frontline there are neighbouring countries (Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, and the Netherlands Antilles), followed by those of the Andean Community (Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), and finally by those retaining historical, privileged links with Caracas: the USA, Spain, and Argentina. Most of them have relaxed their laws to facilitate the shelter of the Venezuelan diaspora. The growing impact of the Venezuelan crisis on these countries' internal problems and interests forces them to refrain from the usual *laissez-faire* and to avoid using diplomatic caution.

In the wake of its Cuban and Nicaraguan predecessors, most of the time the Chavista revolution has been several steps ahead of its opponents and third parties. Contributing factors have been social engineering, political

audacity, established abuses, and the use of public repression as a deterrent.

Partners of the [Forum de Sao Paulo](#) (FSP) contribute not only to shaping current affairs in Venezuela, but also to maintaining control over medium-to-long term scenarios by imposing the terms of the debate, election dates, the eligibility of opponents, the identity and selection of [international partners](#), and the conditions for public freedoms.

If the question of 'how far' is certainly geographic, it is no less political and topological. Indeed, the power strategy of Bolivarianism spreads like a hydra: it takes over spaces while gaining time, in order to secure its role and foster its perpetuation. Such a capillary framework has a bewitching influence, and it prevails thanks to its underlying project, while dominating through the control of everyday life.

This enveloping, all-embracing dimension is the essential key to subjugation: by giving the impression that all can be controlled, from elections to the procurement of medicines, it gives way to resignation, restraining human spontaneity. According to [Hanna Arendt](#), the limitation of spontaneity was the civilizational target of totalitarian experiments. Emblematic of the decay of democratic institutions in Venezuela is the fact that elections are emptied of any meaning, with the act of voting deprived of secrecy, equality and freedom. To understand the historic structure of this preservation of power, we have to underline how electoral responsibilities, mediation, measures and statistics, the monopoly of state force and justice have always been entrusted to the so-called 'loyals' (to the regime).

Sixty years in Cuba, forty in Nicaragua, twenty in Venezuela, all those experiences reveal the

extent to which political alternation is banned and crises can be used to their advantage.

The case of Venezuela demonstrates how institutions like UNASUR, CELAC and CARICOM, only to cite a few, are incapable of addressing regional political crises. Yet credible and coherent organizational support is vital. The Lima Group, stemming from the limited action of the Organization of American States (OAS) and originally composed of 12 Latin American countries, runs important democratisation initiatives. Macri, Argentina's president, led the way during his recent European tour. He forced Putin to silence in Moscow by putting the Venezuela case on the table and [presenting it](#) as "the only exception in a region that emanates peace." In Paris, he backed Macron in his appeal to the European Union to strengthen sanctions against the Maduro government and to make sure others also exert "[effective pressure](#)". Back in Buenos Aires, while Macri was discussing possible oil sanctions with the US Secretary of State, the parliament formally welcomed the exiled mayor of Caracas. If Macri's leadership were confirmed, the transition out of the crisis in Venezuela could still hold hope for democracy. On the other hand, if this year's elections in [Mexico](#), [Colombia](#) and Brazil lead to the victory of FSP associates, such a result would unveil the institutional weakness of the Lima Group.

Western democracies can take further action to deal with how the state's management of the crisis has never stopped stimulating the undesirable effects of a "[risk society](#)". When Bolivarianism is forced to defend itself wherever the rule of law is not dead, its destabilising force of action is undermined.

Strengthening the 'cordon sanitaire' put in place by the USA, Canada and EU towards

Venezuelan government officials, their entourage and companies – funded with Venezuelan public money – is a significant catalyst for common action. Other initiatives amplify the action of such a jurisdictionalization: the international recognition of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (exiled in 2017), the entrusting of (national) cases to foreign and international criminal courts, the freezing of involved assets and their provision to compensate for emergencies¹.

Each prosecution at the international level is a success of the law over a government not used to being held accountable and over a governance model that integrated permanent conspiracy into the state apparatus. This would also be a message from the democratic West to the imperial supporters of Chavism (Putin and his collaborators, China and Iran), as well as a decisive blow to their “matchmaker” (Cuba) and its claims of ubiquity.

The utilitarian univocity and the polarizing dichotomy characterising intellectual thinking about Venezuela must fade away in favour of more pragmatic and interactive perspectives: it is never only a single factor that plays out in complex contexts filled with asymmetries; the management of consequences is a matter of mutual learning between the ruling and the ruled; the ‘rhetoric of war’, so much promoted by Chavism, now affects everything. Not only is the advent of a “D-day” one of the issues unequivocally invoked even by actors whose democratic and dialogical orientation is indisputable, but the effects of devastation are omnipresent even if the war has not occurred yet. A real civilizational challenge, and not only political, is expected in Venezuela, a country where the humanitarian and democratic values of the West seem more than ever compromised.

¹ Strengthening the multilateral support to democratization carried out through young local leaders will also contribute to re-establishing, internally, a democratic environment, necessary to overcome crises.