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BULLETIN

Maduro's Venezuelan Regime Further Consolidates Its Authoritarian Rule

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More than three months after they rigged the presidential election, the Venezuelan authorities keep intimidating the public and persecuting the opposition to accept the re-election of Nicolás Maduro. International attempts at a dialogue and threats of new sanctions are not preventing that usurpation of power and the regime does not fear isolation. Rather, it counts on cooperation with proven partners (China, Iran, Cuba, and Russia) and expects that other countries will recognise Maduro's rule over time. The effectiveness of the pressure on the Venezuelan authorities depends on raising the costs of their illegal activities, including the sealing of sanctions, among other factors.

The Venezuelan Chavista regime—continuators of the policies of Hugo Chávez, the president in 1999-2013—insist that Nicolás Maduro, who has led the country for more than a decade, won the presidential election of 28 July. However, an unprecedented operation by the Venezuelan opposition to document the results of the votes confirmed a decisive victory for Edmundo González Urrutia, who represented the Democratic Unity Platform (PUD), an opposition coalition: Maduro obtained 30% and González 67% of votes, according to the 25,000 voting protocols (83.5% of the total) that PUD representatives managed to collect. [The Venezuelan authorities](#) have not disclosed the state's official detailed results and are working towards a trouble-free inauguration of Maduro's third presidential term on 10 January 2025. Next, they want to ensure the victory of Chavista candidates in next year's parliamentary, state, and local elections.

Difficulties in Making Maduro's Victory Credible. The pre-election time demonstrated that the authorities wanted to maintain their rule at all costs. The main evidence was the [blatant violations of the agreement](#) on equal electoral conditions reached with the opposition on 17 October 2023 in Barbados. After that, the regime arrested several human rights defenders and opposition representatives, and declared María Corina Machado, elected as the PUD candidate in the primaries on 22 October 2023, ineligible. In the end, the coalition put González forward and Machado supported him during the campaign. His

high lead in the vote surprised the authorities, despite their intense promotion of Maduro and attempts to weaken the opposition. Solid proof of the defeat made it hard for the regime to validate the official version.

Prior to the election, the authorities highlighted the high scores of the electronic voting system in independent audits, but on voting day, they said the counting system had been hacked. Later, they questioned the authenticity of the voting records collected by PUD and threatened those who disseminated them with prison. Now, they mainly refer to the alleged legality of their procedures, saying that the National Election Commission (CNE) and Supreme Court (TSJ) certified the result, but both institutions are dependent on and subservient to the authorities.

Shortly after the elections, the authorities stepped up their repression and terrorising of the public through violent suppression of protests and detentions, among other methods. Venezuelan NGO Foro Penal estimated that on 8 November there were 1,963 political prisoners in Venezuela, of which 1,836 (including 69 minors) had been detained since 29 July. The regime also threatened they would arrest Machado and González. On 8 September, the latter obtained asylum in Spain, but he revealed that he was forced to confirm Maduro's victory in writing in exchange for permission to leave. At the end of October, the regime handed a red note against González to Interpol.

The authorities have tried to lend credibility to Maduro's supposed re-election by pointing out that it was recognised by other countries, including Bolivia, China, Honduras, Iran, Cuba, and [Russia](#), all mainly close political or economic partners of Venezuela. They also cited the positive evaluation of international observers, although the overwhelming majority of them are supportive of or were invited to Venezuela at the expense of the regime. In contrast, the authorities rejected negative assessments of the fairness of the elections by a small number of other independent observers, including the U.S.-based Carter Center and a panel of UN experts. They also dismissed recent reports of a new wave of repression, issued by the UN independent fact-finding mission on Venezuela appointed in 2019.

The regime has retaliated against a number of governments that have rejected Maduro's victory. For example, it cut diplomatic relations with [Argentina](#) and suspended air connections with Panama. In September and October, Venezuelan security services arrested nearly 20 foreigners (from the U.S., Czechia, Spain, Colombia, and some other countries), arguing they had been plotting against Maduro, but presumably intending to use them as hostages.

International Initiatives towards Venezuela. Calls for the publication of detailed results and to end repression, as well as support for the opposition's actions, dominated in most post-election reactions from abroad. For example, at the end of September the EU and more than 30 countries, including Poland, issued a joint statement on the issue on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

The most important attempt to mediate between the regime and the opposition came from three presidents, all ideologically close to Maduro: Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Colombia's Gustavo Petro, and Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The last one, however, withdrew from the initiative in August, explaining that he would rely on Venezuelan institutions to verify the results. Lula and Petro called for a detailed voting record, but refrained from criticising the regime, considering that this would damage the dialogue. In mid-August, they suggested a rerun of the elections, a solution rejected by both sides of the conflict in Venezuela. The two leaders have consistently opposed sanctions, arguing that they mainly hit the public.

The U.S. has for years maintained a series of restrictions on the Maduro regime, including sanctions against the oil industry and on government officials. Shortly after the elections, it declared them rigged and González the victor. The Biden administration called for a peaceful transfer of power. Interestingly, in August, it dismissed media reports of secret negotiations on amnesty for senior regime figures, including Maduro (he faces drug trafficking charges in the U.S.) in exchange for regime concessions. In mid-September, it introduced sanctions against more than a dozen CNE and TSJ representatives.

EU diplomacy maintains it cannot recognise Maduro's victory without verified detailed results. It has urged the Venezuelan regime to stop its repression and release political prisoners, but officially is not considering new sanctions. It has not recognised

the victory of the PUD candidate, unlike the European Parliament, which did so on 17 September and awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to González and Machado on 24 October. Among the EU countries, [Spain](#) stands out for its active involvement in resolving the post-election crisis, as it has extensive economic relations with Venezuela, a Spanish diaspora of nearly 140,000 people in the country, and a nearly 480,000-strong Venezuelan diaspora at home.

Prospects. Empowering the Venezuelan opposition, attempting mediation, or exerting diplomatic pressure will not persuade the Venezuelan authorities to make concessions. The regime instead will compensate for Maduro's lack of electoral legitimacy with repression and by enforcing the loyalty of the command of the army and other armed services—key pillars of its rule. It may make pretend conciliatory moves and pay lip service to some democratic principles, while continuing to weaken the opposition so Chavista candidates will win next year's elections unhindered.

The failure of Lula and Petro to persuade the regime to compromise prove the ineffectiveness of a conciliatory approach and calls into question the policies of both leaders in the previous two years to [normalise relations with Venezuela](#) and legitimise Maduro. These efforts have not prevented the consolidation and increased tyranny of the regime, nor has it reversed the trend of the exodus of Venezuelans. The estimates of migrants and refugees amount to almost 8 million, with the largest numbers in Colombia (2.9 million), Peru (1.5 million), Brazil (568,000), and the U.S. (545,000).

The pressure on the Venezuelan authorities depends on increasing the costs of their illegal actions, including charging those directly responsible for terror against opponents. Issuing arrest warrants for Maduro and other regime officials for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court could be one way. This would require expanding the evidence in the case against Venezuela initiated in 2018, and the continued work of the UN fact-finding mission may help. Last month, the UN Human Rights Commission extended the mission's mandate until October 2026 (Poland supported it). Money flows, as well as the corruption and organised crime links that have enabled the illegal enrichment of regime members and their families, also require a detailed analysis. The EU could promote international cooperation in this field and, for example, investigate cases of large investments by Venezuelans in the real estate sector, including holders of so-called golden visas (e.g., in Spain).

The consolidation of the Maduro regime paves the way for a further strengthening of its cooperation with authoritarian allies, Iran and Russia in particular, and more freedom for actions hitting the U.S. and its partners, among other goals. Increased anti-Western intelligence or disinformation activities or uncontrolled arms transfers could be some of the rising dangers. Preventing such a regime network of mutual support to strengthen, as well as engaging in the resolution of the crisis in Venezuela, including the issue of mass emigration, may be important areas of collaboration of the new U.S. administration with other Latin American countries and the EU, among other partners.