



# The roller coaster of disruptions and rapprochements between Venezuela and Colombia. A brief, prospective reflection

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In August 2022, Venezuela and Colombia resumed formal diplomatic and consular relations after an unprecedented disruption since February 2019. In September 2022, pedestrian passage, cargo and private vehicle transit was allowed or expanded after the historic shutdown of the formal crossing points on the common border in August 2015. The disruptions and closures imposed by Venezuela's president Nicolás Maduro are the result of governmental tensions with former Colombian presidents Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque. On the other hand, the realignment of relations and ties responds to current circumstances, namely the left-leaning ideological affinity

between Maduro and the new president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro. It can be stated that the distancing of the Venezuelan government from Colombia stems from the erosion of the democratic order and the increasing autocratic nature of the *Chavista* administrations. In turn, this is the cause of the political conflict in the country that has become chronic, inextricable, and multidimensional. As its resolution or permutation has been impossible to date, it has generated tragic consequences both in both countries and in the region, especially for Colombia, despite attempts in the form of multiple dialogue and negotiation mechanisms, all unsuccessful so far. On the contrary, with few exceptions, the current rapprochement and binational dialogue circumvents crucial issues for the world and Venezuela: Democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the migration of Venezuelans into Colombia, which reaches 2.5 million people according to the June 2023 update of the United Nations' Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V, 2023).

For the last decade and a half, a whirlwind has engulfed the turbulent relations held by Venezuelan presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro with Colombian presidents Álvaro Uribe Vélez and Juan Manuel Santos. Also, a historical severing of ties with Iván Duque by Maduro and rapprochement with Gustavo Petro have been witnessed. All these fluctuations negatively affect the population and the different dynamics along a shared border of approximately 2,219 km (almost 1,380 mi), as well as the flow of Venezuelan forced to migrate who, in a proportion of 90% (6.6 million) have fled through that border, and of whom 75% (4.9 million) have passed through the corridor between the State of Táchira, in Venezuela, and the Department of Norte de Santander, in Colombia. These percentages have been certified by the studies of [Universidad del Rosario's] Observatory on Venezuela and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Colombia (2019) and by the research of Marleny Bustamante and Francisco Sánchez for the Center for Border and Integration Studies of Venezuela (Centro de Estudios de Fronteras e Integración de Venezuela, 2022). Formal bilateral trade, primarily conducted across the land border, declined substantially from USD 7 bn in 2008 to USD 0.22 bn in 2020 according to Colombia's Ministry of Commerce (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2023). Harsh and constant tirades, as well as the disruptions and shutdowns, have left these territories, their peoples, and their interactions deprived

of effective governmental activity, and under a ‘hybrid criminal rule’, as underscored by Rodrigues *et al* (2022). This takes the form of rogue armed groups of diverse nature such as leftist insurgents (guerrillas), paramilitary groups, drug trafficking, transnational crime of human trafficking, common crime, and government officials of both countries. They overlap to different extents and impose a sort of *de facto* rule over people and goods.

In mid-2023, bilateral relations are in full swing: A frantic diplomatic activity with four presidential meetings in 10 months, international conference in Bogota focused on the Venezuelan crisis, concurrently with Venezuela’s dialogue and negotiation process in Mexico, growth of formal bilateral trade closing at USD 728 m FOB in 2022 and USD 235 m FOB between January and April 2023 per figures from Colombia’s Ministry of Commerce (2023). This is very favorable to Colombia given the Venezuelan economic debacle. In addition, Maduro’s rule has become a guarantor of the peace process between the Petro administration and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) guerrilla, the largest remaining rebel group in Colombia. For his part, the Colombian president is trying to build his leadership across the continent upon the Venezuelan crisis as part of his platform. To this end, he has been seen shaking hands with the president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva, while he remains tight-lipped regarding the root cause of the situation in Venezuela: The unapproachable political crisis created by the authoritarian exercise of power under *Chavismo*. All this helps Maduro rebuild diplomatic ties with a significant portion of the hemisphere: He has returned into the guest list of presidential summits; he has been invited to rejoin the Andean Community (Comunidad Andina, CAN); he is encouraged to return to the Organization of American States (OAS). However, Maduro backs down from this organization because it would imply accepting its continental human rights system which has issued numerous devastating rulings on his government.

Although formal bilateral relations, especially those of trade and consular nature, should have been preserved and should never have been severed, at this stage of readjustment and regarded prospectively for the purposes of sustainability, three fundamental conditions should be met for the sake of prioritizing democracy and human rights: 1) Recognizing the political conflict in Venezuela as caused primarily by

the undermining of democracy, i.e., the increasing autocratic nature of the *Chavista* regime. Otherwise, resuming relations normalizes authoritarianism; 2) Recognizing consequences of this conflict, essentially a complex humanitarian emergency with massive human rights violations, including crimes against humanity being committed, as reported by the United Nations (UN) and the ongoing case filed with the International Criminal Court (ICC), evident in the largest forced migration worldwide in the absence of a military conflict or a natural catastrophe, yet with regional repercussions, as well as increasingly frail government bodies on the verge of a failed state, among others; 3) Respecting sovereignty and the principle of self-determination is fundamental in international law; but their irreplaceable component is human rights and democracy, as established in the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Complying with the former conditions and not the latter opens the door to normalize and treat atrocities from a relativistic perspective under the guise of not meddling in domestic affairs. Respect for sovereignty in Venezuela means restoring the authority of the Sovereign, i.e., the Venezuelan people, to choose and determine their destiny (Sánchez & Alfaro, 2022). These fundamental conditions are to be met by all stakeholders, not only political operators, but also business, social, and academic groups, in short, the whole civil society, for its role in constructing truly democratic and thriving national societies, so that their common ties and dynamics can be fairly sustained and intensified.

In the case of Venezuela and Colombia, their inescapable proximity, rich common history since the pre-Columbian era, increased during the colonial period, and intertwined in the republican principles of the short-lived confederated Greater Colombia and the enormous fabric of relations held since the beginning of its offshoots as standalone nations, Colombia and Venezuela, since 1830, compels their governments and civil society to understand each other without leaving aside the needs and realities of their national societies and their peoples for petty or ideological agendas. Citizens are the ultimate beneficiaries of successful public policies or the victims of authoritarian drifts and armed conflicts. Albeit widely known, in these times and for the future, it is worth reminding this: Peace in Colombia relies on Venezuela and, in turn, peace in Venezuela is necessarily linked to that of Colombia.

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