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## Venezuela: First episode of the new Cold War?

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### Introduction

Since the beginning of 2019, Venezuela has been in the focus of international politics because of its political and institutional crisis, together with its economic and social collapse generated in 2013, transformed into a regional and international crisis. The exit of some estimated three to four million emigrants mostly to neighboring countries has additionally deepened the contexts of the regional crisis including also the security aspect. In short, the crisis can be described as oscillating between the issues of defense

of human rights and democratic values, the authoritarian regime of socialist orientation, the current American strategy of strengthening its political and strategic influence in Latin America, the presence of significant non-regional emerging global factors, as well as the cyclical changes of political parties in power in this part of the world. Accordingly, this crisis tests the hemispheric and global leadership of the US, the influences of emerging global powers like China, Russia, India or Turkey, recently, and the potential of Latin American regionalism and political consensus.

Concerning the causes of Venezuelan crisis, we have to underline the progressive deterioration of governance, economic downturn, corruption, dramatic impoverishment of the population, lack of food and medicines, migrations, delinquency issue, etc. In addition, we could underline that this crisis has been transformed into a complex international (global) problem with direct and collateral consequences at not only local or national levels, but also regional Latin American and continental American, due to the US active role in it. Bearing in mind the protagonism assumed by regional and extra-regional actors such as Russia, China, EU, India, Turkey or even Iran, this crisis projects global dimensions. Therefore, experts in Latin American politics and security point to the dangerous situation of Venezuelan State, supported by the model of the so-called Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which evidently caused new hegemonic misbalances within Latin America and its place in the global geopolitical agenda.

### **The genesis of Chavismo and the “Bolivarian Revolution”**

When speaking about ideological basis of *Chavismo* we have to consider that before Hugo Chávez became the President of Venezuela, he had issued the following statement: “I, Hugo Chávez, am neither a Marxist nor an anti-Marxist. I am neither a communist nor an anti-communist. One needs to step out of Marxism. It

can serve as a framework but it is not a solution, especially for our country and our economic circumstances in which, I believe, there is no trace of the clash between the laborers and entrepreneurs.” This statement partly invalidates those ideological and strictly leftist or socialist approaches to this phenomenon.

On the other hand, a German sociologist and political scientist Heinz Dietrich, known as one of the best experts in the field of contemporary political development of Latin America and Chávez’s political and ideological adviser, affirmed that Venezuela had gone through the specific revolutionary process producing profound socio-economic changes in favor of the majority of population. Therefore, the *Chavismo* has to be understood and interpreted as a specific nontraditional form of making politics in the frame of long populist tradition in Latin America.

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Further on, the populism has had a very important place in more than 200 years of independent Latin American political history. The influence of populism was decisive for the so-called emancipation process, which started in the late thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its main characteristics could briefly be summarized as following: a) populism is a mass social-political movement oriented towards the solution for deep and complex economic, social and political problems of Latin American societies; b) this socio-political and economic phenomenon appeared in the frame of democratic societies in crisis, acting and being notably authoritarian; c) the strengthening of the meaning of the Nation and the State are the principal objectives of populist direct activism with the mass, which evidently reduced the institutionalized framework of democratic system; d) socially marginalized mass represents the main political power of populism and e) the appearance of a new form of charismatic leader, as a key element for understanding of populist heritage in Latin American political history. The new leadership is based on the thoughts about the importance of the nation, national identity, emancipation and the national state that has become populist, more independent and socially balanced.

Consequently, until the proclamation of Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Chavismo* could be studied ideologically as a new form of populism, after *Aprismo*, *Varguismo*, *Peronismo*, yet

bearing in mind that this is a completely new expression of populist political and economic formation. All other forms of leftist populism that appeared in Latin America are similar to each other and form the so-called “chavista model” based on the special reference to the roll of military forces in political and social life of the country, the relevance of solving all aspects of marginalization of indigenous population and strong anti-globalist foreign policy orientation. In addition, those movements are based on the model of direct democracy with the proclamation of socialist aspirations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century — the fact that gave rise to great debates and doubts concerning the future of traditional western democratic model in this part of the world. Indeed, *Chavismo* in particular was identified as a legally questionable and somewhat anti-democratic socio-political and economic project based on “infective” system and ideology.

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The structural approach to *Chavismo* as a new form of populism includes the study of its main objectives such as the intensive

political and economic modernization of almost completely destroyed, devastated country looted by neo-liberal reforms and corruption of traditional political elite: Social-democratic AD and Christian-democrat COPEI that governed Venezuela starting from 1958 until the appearance of Chávez. In reality, it was by the new constitution, adopted in 1999, that for the first time in political history of Venezuela military representatives were given the opportunity to take an active part in political life by being given voting rights. This fact demonstrates that militarism in the frame of *Chavismo* has different ideological principles in comparison with the past, when military authorities were obliged to defend the society from communism and subversion activities.

In brief, the “Bolivarian Revolution” during the Chávez period was a peaceful socio-economic and cultural process of intensive internal reforms accompanied by the new foreign policy strategy. Internally, it was for the first time that the linguistic, ethnic and territorial rights of indigenous communities were guaranteed by the National Constitution. The revolutionary government initiated the so-called “Bolivarian Missions” as a series of programs for social justice, social welfare, anti-poverty strategy, reform of educational and electoral system and a new military recruiting program. When the second presidential mandate began, Chávez insisted on “Bolivar Plan” with the parallel

reform of unions’ movement, introducing military forces in this process as well. “Bolivar Plan” meant that soldiers were participating in important infrastructural projects, reconstruction of hospitals, maintaining of hygiene in urban and rural zones, etc. Chávez specially insisted on the military participation in the implementation of the so-called “Law of Land”. According to Chávez this was a radical agrarian reform having in mind that large estate called “latifundio” in Spanish was the biggest problem of contemporary rural reality of Venezuela. In fact, the agrarian reform was the basic element of the so-called nutrition security as a pillar of the strategy against poverty that also involved healthcare, environmental issues related to better life and development in rural zones, housing, education, etc.

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During this period the foreign policy was dramatically changed, ideologically redefined and intensified both on regional and international-global levels. This platform was conceived in the belief that Venezuela could

be one of the main regional actors in the new geostrategy of the world at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially due to its enormous natural resources: oil and natural gas. This pattern is fundamental for understanding Venezuelan international bilateral or multilateral activities with OPEC, China, Russia, India, South Africa or Arab countries like Libya, Iraq or Iran. Bearing in mind that Venezuelan foreign policy is openly anti-American it is easy to understand the worries of official Washington concerning the security agenda of the world in general and Latin America in particular.

### **The new chapter: Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The new regime was immediately characterized by local political opposition and oligarchic circles supported by official Washington, as a communist one. The internal political tensions especially increased when Chávez decided to reconstruct the top management of the state owned oil company “Petróleos de Venezuela”. This decision evoked controversy not only in Venezuela but also abroad in Latin America and even more in the US. During the presidency of George W. Bush Chávez’s ideology was openly and directly identified as dangerous for democratic development in Latin America. The polarization in the frame of International Community was deepened after the government passed a number of laws that

promoted values of cooperation and solidarity, and the new curricular program for public and private schools focusing on learning to create, live together, value and reflect. Given that the educational process was at the top of the revolutionary priorities, those suspicions intensified when the revolution was renamed as socialist in the presidential speech delivered on August 19th, 2005. The fact that the goals of the “Bolivarian Revolution” were linked directly to the ideology of the so-called “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” brought about the definite polarization of Venezuelan society and gave the phenomenon a completely new ideological content and political projection.

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Why did *Chavismo* decide to transform the fluid and flexible concept of the “Bolivarian Revolution” into Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In reality, the proposal of construction of the “new civilization” was launched in order to introduce qualitatively different changes to

“bourgeois civilization”. Different institutional transformations in practice were focused on the replacement of the societal *status quo* by achieving the substitution of the market economy with the so-called economy of democratically planned value. Parallel to this, the class transformation of the state was initiated by establishing a new state administration in service to the majority of population. The most important ideological change was the institutionalization of the model of direct democracy due to the fact that traditional representative democracy is not capable of responding to challenges of Venezuelan society.

To summarize, such ideological proclamations defined the priorities such as the construction of efficient popular state based on the rule of law, development of new production forces and redefinition of typology of property, institutionalization of popular power, further perfection and implementation of the theory of new socialist development and effective education and formation of vanguard leadership and middle officials. These ideological tendencies provoked deep polarization of the society with many tensions and clashes on the political scene.

### **Conclusion: The collapse of Chavismo and the search for solution**

The second attempt of Chávez to obtain the majority for constitutional reform in order to run for the third presidential mandate in 2012 was the first Bolivarian project rejected on referendum. It was evident that society was definitely divided into two antagonistic blocs, and the opposition notably fragmented and without strong leadership or socio-political platform. In fact, *Chavismo* showed for the first time the necessity to obtain electoral support of other social sectors and not only of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

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Nevertheless, the question of sustainability of the regime based on dramatic ideological changes was questioned due to direct dependence on the income of oil exports at a price-unstable international market. Even “Recovery Plan, Prosperity and Stabilization”, introduced in August 2018, failed to abate the hyperinflation, in spite of monetary restrictions,

rise of taxes on businesses and measures taken by introducing crypto currency - the “petro” - in order to stabilize prices of basic goods and services. Some estimations concern the contraction of the economy in 2019 by another 20%, which followed by a previous fall of GDP for 50% could lead to economic catastrophe and possible macroeconomic collapse as a result of increased economic contraction and spiral hyperinflation.

The multilevel erosion of *Chavismo* came to critical limits with massive protests against the regime, clashes on the streets of all major cities, enormous migrations and finally the collapse of the supply system of electricity, water, medicines, etc. When Juan Guaidó proclaimed himself the “president in charge”, the internationalization of the Venezuelan crisis was noticeable, particularly the intense efforts of the United States to influence it. The place of Venezuela on the global agenda was changed and interpreted as the first episode of the new Cold War in spite of the fact that Venezuela is not a new Cuba and Russia is not the former Soviet Union. However, these terminological discrepancies reflect a high level of complex interdependence within the framework of globalization. Namely, the so called “Western hemisphere” (Monroe Doctrine, 1823) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was exposed to the significant

economic, financial, and geostrategic challenges including the military presence of Russia and China. Therefore, the American approach to Venezuelan crisis was extremely threatening and inflexible, including the announcements of support to Guaidó and possible undertaking of military intervention against Nicolás Maduro. However, Russia, China, India or Turkey insist on respecting Maduro’s legitimacy, the respect of international public law and the exclusive competence of UN Security Council in finding solutions for this crisis by preventing foreign military interventions.

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Anyhow, the question of strategic oil reserves, gold, and some rare metals that Maduro has on his disposal is definitely in the focus of global interests and domination. In Latin America, the countries with right-wing governments supported the US policy towards Venezuela but rejected the eventual military intervention. In addition, millions of migrants from Venezuela

cause instability in neighboring countries and bordering regions, intensification of human and drug trafficking, and even guerrilla and other illegal groups' activities. All these events have jeopardized Latin American security and therefore many international initiatives have been launched to find a solution for Venezuela and its society that is very close to a bloody civil war with incalculable national, regional and global consequences. Besides, it should be emphasized that Venezuelan armed forces are extremely influenced by ideology, well-organized and equipped, advised by Cuban and Russian military experts and supported by "Revolutionary militias", composed of one million armed men and women who are ready to sacrifice their lives for Maduro.

When Guaidó's project of a coup against Maduro failed (April 30, 2019), the political situation worsened dramatically causing deaths of civilians and showing that society is definitely incapable of overcoming numerous problems related to its viability as a social, economic or democratic system. The division was so clear that both Maduro and Guaidó, aware that there is no possible victory in actual circumstances, accepted the negotiations under international mediation and supervision. De facto, both sides became aware of the necessity of launching negotiations to reach a kind of

lasting agreement for political and economic transition as the only way for social pacification and prevention of further economic decay.

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The Lima Group, the International Contact Group on Venezuela and some announcements of possible papal or Spanish mediations appeared in the meantime. Finally, Norway offered its well-known experience in conflict resolutions to relive the paralyzed political dialogue in Venezuela - the initiative that was accepted by both sides. In reality, very little is known of what was discussed in Oslo, but the fact is that the two parties will continue to have a dialogue after dramatic last five months of trying to annihilate one another politically. Once again, it has been proven that dialogue is the only way towards the transitional solution of the complex and contradictory legacy of authoritarian regimes of various political profiles.

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