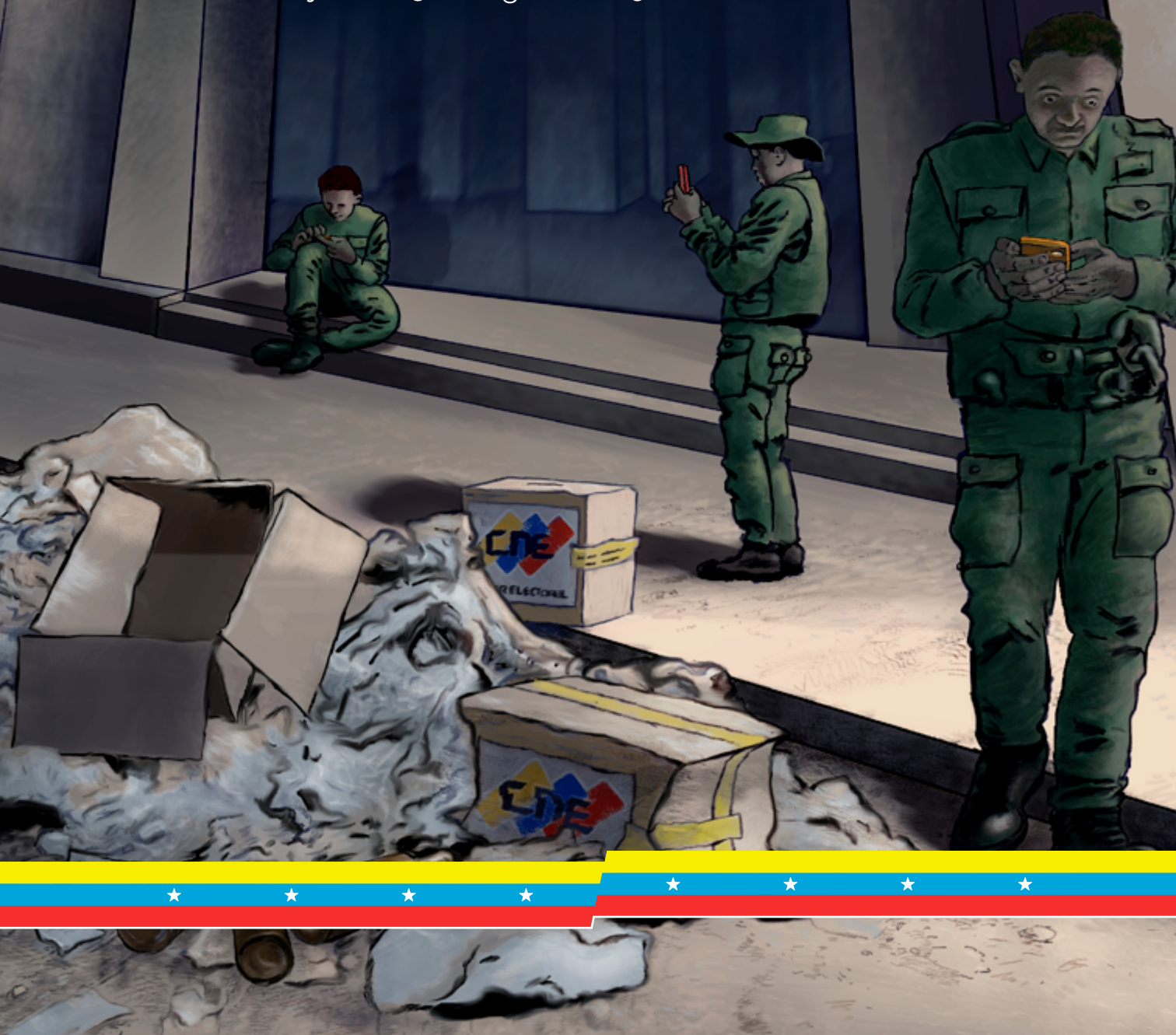


# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 27J: THE FAILED NORMALIZATION. MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS AND THE CLOSURE OF CIVIC SPACE IN VENEZUELA.

1 de junio al 31 de agosto 2025



## **Credits**

This report was prepared by Human Rights of Venezuela in Movement, an initiative of Venezuelan human rights organizations to continue denouncing and documenting, while safeguarding the integrity of activists on the ground.

## **Layout, illustration, and photography**

Friends of Human Rights of Venezuela in Movement

## **Period of this report:**

From June 1 to August 31, 2025

## Executive Summary

The Report "27J: The Failed Normalization. Municipal Elections and the Closure of Civic Space in Venezuela" covers the period between June 1 and August 31, 2025, with some subsequent events, and gives continuity to the previous reports of Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento (Black Book, Red Book, and Gray Book), which fill the absence of an all-encompassing view of democratic deterioration and human rights violations in the country. The report documents how the municipal elections of July 27, 2025, far from signifying a return to institutionality, constituted a new episode of democratic mockery and a deepening of the complex democratic emergency in Venezuela.

## Main Findings

### 1) Failed strategy of institutional normalization:

The early call for municipal and parliamentary elections for 2026 sought to project an image of normality. However, with a 29% real participation (calculated on the Electoral Register), the ruling party obtained 85% of the mayoralties and 83% of the council seats, consolidating a scheme of "elections without choosing."

### 2) Drug trafficking as a structural economy:

According to estimates by Transparencia Venezuela and UNODC, about 24% of the world's cocaine transited through Venezuela in 2023, generating revenues of more than 8.185 billion dollars in 2024. High civilian and military authorities are linked to the so-called Cartel of the Suns, which makes drug trafficking a pillar of political-military power and a factor of systematic human rights violations.

### 3) United States anti-drug operation in the Caribbean:

The military deployment ordered by Washington in August 2025 produced two attacks against Venezuelan boats, with 14 people dead. These events constitute extrajudicial executions, by depriving the victims of due process. The Venezuelan government responded with Plan Independence 200, which implies the activation of 284 military and militia fronts, consolidating the militarization of social life under the pretext of national defense.

### 4) Migration crisis and human mobility:

By mid-2025 there were 6.87 million displaced Venezuelans in 17 Latin American countries. An unprecedented phenomenon of reverse migratory flow was documented, with more than 14,000 forced returns from the U.S. and Mexico to the south, in precarious conditions. In the European Union, 49,000 asylum applications in the first half of 2025, but only 0.02% of formal recognition as refugees, which forces millions to subsist with renewable humanitarian permits with less protection capacity.

### **5) Closure of civic space:**

167 violations of freedom of expression between January and August 2025, including censorship, intimidation, and 24 detentions. 18 journalists remained deprived of liberty until September 2025, while 12 human rights defenders were also deprived of liberty. The pattern of forced semiclandestinity was consolidated: parties, unions, and NGOs operate under harassment and threats, without headquarters or public spokespersons, taking precautions to guarantee the freedom and integrity of their members.

### **6) Arbitrary detentions and hostage diplomacy:**

Between June and August 2025, 71 arbitrary detentions were documented, 63% of them against party militants. By September 2025, 1,056 confirmed political prisoners, including 41 foreigners and 48 binational persons used as bargaining chips. During the period under study, every 48 hours a member of a political party in Venezuela was detained.

### **7) Short-term enforced disappearances:**

45% of the arbitrary detentions involved short-term disappearances. 110 active cases were documented by September 2025. This practice seeks to break victims, intimidate families, and sow collective fear.

### **8) Social protest repressed by fear:**

OVCS registered 1,249 protests in the first half of 2025, but with a 48% drop compared to 2024. In July 2025, electoral month, the reduction was 89% compared to the previous year. Social discontent persists, but the population avoids demonstrating due to the risk of violent repression.

## **Conclusions**

The documented facts show that in Venezuela a State policy of systematic repression is maintained, characterized by:

- Electoral mockery to perpetuate a de facto government.
- Capture of the State by illicit economies.
- Militarization of society.
- Closure of civic space and semiclandestinity imposed on social organizations.
- Systematic use of arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances as control devices.
- These patterns meet the criteria established by international law to be considered crimes against humanity.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations to the future democratic government —focused on restoring the rule of law, transitional justice, and the reopening of civic space— and to the international community, which it urges to maintain pressure, protection of victims, and long-term accompaniment of the Venezuelan people.



## 1. **Context and Background**

The previous reports of Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento have made it possible to trace a line of continuity among different milestones of democratic deterioration: the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024 ([Black Book](#)), the installation of a de facto government in January 2025 ([Red Book](#)), and the deepening of the complex democratic emergency during the first half of 2025 ([Gray Book](#)). Each of these episodes confirmed that repression is not a circumstantial resource, but a sustained strategy of political and social control, applied in a gradual manner and with high levels of coordination among civil, military, and security institutions.

The National Assembly of 2026 had been outlined as the next stage of that strategy. In the framework of a country where political representation has already been eroded by disqualifications, judicial interventions in parties, and the criminalization of dissent, power seeks to use the new electoral cycle as a mechanism to legitimize authoritarian continuity. As pointed out in the previous reports, the prevailing logic has not been to open spaces for participation, but to close the democratic field even further under the appearance of legality.

In this context, the trends described in earlier reports —the persecution of human rights defenders and journalists, the criminalization of international cooperation, the use of armed colectivos as parapolice forces, the practice of short-term enforced disappearances, and the systematic restriction of civic space— remain. The pattern of State terrorism, recognized by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, has been consolidated as a permanent operational framework, where fear, censorship, and militarization function as pedagogical devices to inhibit protest, fragment the opposition, and shape citizen behavior.

The accumulated experience between 2024 and 2025 shows that the current ruling coalition not only seeks to remain in power, but also to remap the political and social structure of the country. The National Assembly of 2026 will be instrumental in that purpose: a space designed to reinforce hegemony, weaken alternative actors, and give continuity to a regime that has chosen structural illegality as its form of government. What follows are some analytical developments that emerged as of June 1, 2025.



### 1.1. **The National Assembly 2026: the failed strategy of normalization**

After the imposition of a de facto government following the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024, the Venezuelan authorities deployed a strategy aimed at promoting the internal and international normalization of their permanence in power. One of the central axes was the early call for regional, municipal, and legislative elections in April 2025, whose elected deputies were to take office in January 2026. With this, they sought to transmit an image of institutional continuity and apparent return to the electoral calendar, despite the fact that the serious irregularities and human rights violations that occurred in the presidential elections remained unresolved.

From the political point of view, this initiative was inscribed in a strategy of co-optation and dispersion to:

- a) Reinforce de facto legitimacy through the occupation of local and parliamentary spaces with authorities loyal to the regime, consolidating a territorial and legislative framework of control.

- b) Divide and wear down the opposition through the selective authorization of candidacies, conditioned by the hegemony of the official electoral apparatus and media censorship.
- c) Present before the international community the narrative of a country that was "resuming democratic normality" through an electoral cycle with new authorities.

On the sociological level, the early elections functioned as a device of social disciplining. The call to vote in the midst of a climate of repression and fear had the objective of accustoming citizens to participate in processes without guarantees, where fraud and coercion were normalized as part of everyday political life. This mechanism, sustained in the use of fear and clientelist dependency, sought to reduce the social expectation of change and project the idea that no real alternatives existed outside the framework imposed by power.

In parallel, the government promoted what various analysts and human rights organizations described as a policy of "hostage exchange." Through the arbitrary detention of activists, opponents, and citizens with dual nationality, the State built a currency of negotiation with external actors, particularly with the United States. The partial release of detained persons was used as an instrument to obtain diplomatic benefits, relief of sanctions, or international legitimacy. This pattern confirmed the instrumentalization of persons deprived of liberty as pieces in a strategy of survival of power, constituting a flagrant violation of human rights and of the principle of human dignity.

Nevertheless, the strategy of normalization encountered structural limits. The lack of credibility of the electoral system, the continuous denunciations of political persecution, and the absence of minimum guarantees for the exercise of rights prevented the early elections from fulfilling the objective of stabilizing the government internationally. They even revealed the problems of convocation of the authorities in what had once been a well-oiled and organized base of electoral support. The evidence of these internal logistical problems motivated the authorities to freeze their desire to promote a reform of the Constitution until the new National Assembly, from which a new political reality in the country was expected to be created, assumed its functions.

The second line of this plan —the use of "hostage exchange" as a valve of negotiation with the international community— also ended up weakened, being perceived as an extortive tactic incompatible with international human rights law. The instrumental character of the detentions evidenced the continuity of a pattern of systematic repression and undermined the attempts to present the government



as a reliable interlocutor. In the face of the weakness of the 25 countries that have nationals detained for political reasons in Venezuela to achieve their release, the United States seems to have increased the cost of the deprivation of liberty of Americans in the country after the approval of the executive order "[Strengthening Efforts to Protect U.S. Nationals from Wrongful Detention Abroad](#)", which establishes a sanctions policy against States that arbitrarily deprive Americans of liberty.

The path toward the installation of a new National Assembly in 2026, conceived as the axis to legitimize and consolidate a government born of fraud, has so far been configured as a failed strategy of normalization. Instead of stabilizing the regime, it deepened isolation and highlighted the contradictions between electoral discourse and authoritarian practices of social control and political repression. In the [Gray Book](#) we recounted how candidates who had not obtained enough votes were assigned parliamentary seats: "the partial bulletin issued by the National Electoral Council itself evidences arbitrary assignments of positions without support in the popular will, awarding seats to candidates or lists that did not reach the required number of votes." This not only distorted the principle of proportional representation, but also evidenced the governmental intentions of giving prominence to opposition political leaders who do not have popular support.

Despite the post-electoral inertia, one element that generated an abrupt change in the dynamics and debates that occurred in Venezuela during the month of August was the deployment of an anti-drug operation by the U.S. authorities in the Caribbean Sea.



## 1.2. The participation of Venezuelan authorities in drug trafficking

Drug trafficking in Venezuela has been consolidated as an illicit economy of great magnitude, with strong penetration in state institutions and in the social life of diverse regions. Due to its implications it has been a topic little investigated by Venezuelan journalism, which survives between persecution and the absence of resources. However, a [report by Transparencia Venezuela in exile](#) indicated that almost 24% of the world production of cocaine transits through the country, which amounts to about 639 tons in 2023, with projections of more than 700 tons for 2024 due to the increase in Colombian production.

The estimates made with data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) allow the financial magnitude of the business to be dimensioned. With an average wholesale price of 12,810 dollars per kilogram of cocaine in Central America and the Caribbean, it is calculated that the gross revenues derived from the transit of cocaine through Venezuela reached 8.185 billion dollars in 2024. To this are added around 50 million dollars generated by the trafficking of marijuana, according to seizures reported in 2023.

These figures reflect that drug trafficking constitutes a source of income comparable to formal economic sectors of the country, but which develops outside the law, with devastating effects on human rights, institutions, and sovereignty.

The report identified high civilian and military authorities —including ministers, commanders of the Armed Forces, and police chiefs— allegedly involved in these networks. By November 2024 the report had pointed out that the so-called Cartel of the Suns, made up of high-ranking officers, had gone from allowing the passage of merchandise to becoming an active operator: designing routes, managing shipments, and collecting profits.

In parallel, Colombian irregular armed groups (dissidents of the FARC and the ELN) maintain a presence in border states such as Zulia, Apure, and Táchira, where they operate alongside Venezuelan mega-gangs, the most notorious being the Tren de Aragua for its continental expansion.

The link between State and organized crime generates a series of grave and systematic violations for the human rights of the population:

- a) Forced displacements in border areas, leaving communities empty and vulnerable.
- b) Labor and sexual exploitation in production and transit camps for drugs.
- c) Generalized violence against rural populations, with murders, kidnappings, and extortion carried out by armed groups and colluded security forces.
- d) Structural impunity, since the justice system is permeated by corruption and collusion with criminal networks.

As conclusions of the revelations of the report it can be affirmed that drug trafficking in Venezuela cannot be understood only as a security problem. It is a structural phenomenon that finances and sustains political-military power, while it erodes democracy and multiplies violations of human rights. With revenues that surpass 8.2 billion dollars annually, this illicit economy has transformed the country into a central link of global drug trafficking, with devastating consequences for its citizens and for regional stability.





### 13. **The dual strategy of the United States toward Venezuela**

United States policy toward Venezuela in the recent period has had a dual character, combining mechanisms of extreme pressure with instruments of negotiation. On one hand, the narrative that presents the regime as a transnational criminal actor was reinforced through judicial accusations, sanctions directed at high officials, and the increase of the reward up to 50 million dollars against Nicolás Maduro. This approach sought to delegitimize any attempt at normalization of the de facto government and to underline its link with drug trafficking and corruption.

At the same time, Washington maintained selective negotiation channels aimed at the protection of strategic and humanitarian interests. Among these stand out:

The renewal of licenses to the company Chevron, which allowed it to continue exploiting and marketing Venezuelan oil, in exchange for agreements that would ensure a certain transparency in financial flows and a relative economic opening.



The establishment of negotiation mechanisms for the release of U.S. citizens detained in Venezuela.

This double approach reveals that U.S. policy was not exempt from ambiguities. While one sector of the administration bet on direct confrontation and the international criminalization of the regime (particularly under the leadership of Secretary of State Marco Rubio), another sector sought to guarantee spaces of economic and humanitarian pragmatism. However, this dual strategy took a turn with the beginning of an anti-drug operation in the Caribbean Sea.

On August 7 the U.S. Department of State and Department of Justice [announced that they were increasing to 50 million](#) the reward for information leading to the arrest of Nicolás Maduro, for accusations of drug trafficking and links with criminal groups.

The legal framework is based on [22 U.S.C. § 2708](#) (Department of State Rewards Program), which authorizes the Secretary of State—in consultation with the Attorney General—to offer and pay rewards for information leading to arrest/conviction for, among other things, international narcotics trafficking. The law defines coordination with Justice and regulates cap, discretion, eligibility, and forms of payment. The amount has evolved over time. The reward was born in 2020 with 15 million after federal accusations. Later it rose to 25 million.

Between the years 2020 and 2024 the discourse about the Cartel of the Suns gained space in U.S. security agencies and foreign policy, especially with the influence of Republican congressmen like [Marco Rubio](#), who maintain that the Venezuelan regime is a "narco-State" and must be confronted with combined strategies of security and sanctions. This approach gained influence starting with the designation of Rubio as U.S. Secretary of State.

Since the end of August, the Donald Trump administration ordered the deployment of a significant military presence in the Caribbean Sea, off the coasts of Venezuela. This has included at least eight warships, one submarine, and other assets, together with approximately four thousand marines and sailors.

In the framework of the anti-drug offensive, two serious incidents with the use of lethal force against vessels coming from Venezuela were recorded:

A first attack occurred on September 2, 2025, when military aircraft attacked a boat from Venezuela in Caribbean waters. The event caused the death of at least 11 people. Washington maintained that the vessel was linked to the Tren

de Aragua and transporting narcotics, while the Venezuelan government denied this version and denounced that it was an attack against defenseless civilians.

On September 15 a second attack occurred, which resulted in the death of 3 additional people. As in the first case, U.S. authorities alleged that they were criminal actors linked to drug trafficking, and Caracas again rejected the accusations, calling the action an act of aggression and violation of sovereignty.

From a human rights perspective, both episodes raise serious concerns. The death of 14 people in total in circumstances not clarified questions the respect for the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality in the use of lethal force.

Furthermore, the victims were deprived of the possibility of due process and judicial defense, configuring facts comparable to extrajudicial executions. The use of military force on the high seas without mechanisms of independent verification opens the door to abuses, collateral damage, and impunity.

These attacks deepen the militarization of the anti-drug fight, displacing the criminal problem into the war terrain and putting at risk civilian populations who transit or work in Caribbean waters.

Up to the closing of this report President Donald Trump has evaded responding whether among the objectives of the anti-drug operation is, as one of them, regime change in the country. [According to analysis](#): *"Trump's comments contrast with the explicit regime change policy of his first term".*

[According to analyst Andrei Serbin Pont](#), the operation is a consequence of a conceptual and legal framework developed by the United States after 9/11 regarding the employment of its Armed Forces in a range of tasks related to the fight against terrorism. In his opinion the primary objectives of U.S. foreign policy for Latin America are the fight against migration and drug trafficking. *"A secondary objective that may suit them—he adds—is if suddenly this generates a collapse of the Venezuelan regime."*



#### 1.4. **The crisis as an opportunity to increase authoritarianism**

Faced with the deployment of U.S. ships, aircraft, and military operations in the Caribbean Sea, the Venezuelan government has responded with a communicational, political, and military strategy that seeks to achieve several simultaneous objectives: to defend sovereignty, to deny accusations of complicity with criminal networks, and to demonstrate to its population and internationally that there is also legitimate state action against drug trafficking.

Plan Independence 200 was announced on September 15 by Nicolás Maduro as a strategy of integral defense in the face of external threats, in particular the U.S. military deployment in the Caribbean Sea. However, beyond the sovereigntist rhetoric, the plan constitutes an instrument of political and social militarization aimed at consolidating the government's internal control in a context of crisis of legitimacy and international isolation.

[\*The operation contemplates the activation\*](#) of 284 deployment fronts that integrate the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB), the Bolivarian Militia, police bodies, and the so-called combatant corps made up of public workers



and organized communities. In its design, the plan establishes phases of military enlistment, territorial deployment, "active resistance," and eventual armed struggle, with presence in coastal, border, and interior areas of the country.

For Nicolás Maduro, confrontation with the United States not only represents a threat, but also an opportunity to reinforce his diminished leadership. By invoking the narrative of defense of sovereignty against "imperialist aggression," he seeks to regroup his social bases and project himself as a commander in resistance. This symbolic resource shifts the internal debate on the democratic crisis toward a scenario of external confrontation, allowing him to re-legitimize himself through militarization.

Beyond the conjuncture with the United States, Plan Independence 200 runs the risk of becoming the new Venezuelan reality. The incorporation of civilian population into defense structures, military training in communities, and the expansion of the role of the militia consolidate a model in which the border between the civil and the military is blurred. Even if the U.S. military presence in the Caribbean were reduced or disappeared, the infrastructure of control and disciplining created under this plan would remain as a structural component of power.

#### Risks for human rights of the re-militarization of the country

- Normalization of social militarization: the fusion between citizenship and armed forces exposes the civilian population to direct risks in scenarios of confrontation.
- Consolidation of authoritarian control: the plan strengthens the government's capacity to repress dissent under the justification of national defense.
- Permanence of the de facto state of exception: under the pretext of external threats, a regime of permanent security is installed without democratic controls or accountability.
- Restrictions on fundamental freedoms: the narrative of "active and permanent resistance" enables the State to arbitrarily limit rights such as freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

Parallel to Plan Independence 200 Nicolás Maduro promotes initiatives to consolidate a national political and social front of support for the government in the context of the U.S. government's anti-drug operation. [\*The National Council for Sovereignty and Peace\*](#) was installed in Caracas on September 16, 2025, with the alleged participation of 434 representatives from diverse sectors of the country. Diplomatic, legal, and political action committees were established, as well as



regional chapters to coordinate territorial initiatives. The “Manifesto for Sovereignty and Peace” was also reaffirmed as a political framework to declare Venezuela, Latin America, and the Caribbean as a zone of peace.

Nicolás Maduro's strategy of using tension with the United States as a platform to reinforce his leadership and normalize militarization finds parallels in other authoritarian experiences in the region. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega has instrumentalized the narrative of external threat to justify systematic repression and the subordination of armed institutions to political control. In Cuba, the U.S. blockade was turned into an argument to maintain a state of permanent mobilization that militarized daily life for decades. In all these cases, the external enemy became a pretext to consolidate power, close democratic spaces, and perpetuate repressive mechanisms under the guise of national defense. Plan Independence 200 projects Venezuela toward a similar model, in which militarization becomes a structural norm, even in the absence of real or immediate threats.

## 1.5. The migration crisis led by Venezuelans continues

### 1.5.1. Venezuelan migration in Latin America

Human mobility of Venezuelan origin continues to constitute one of the main humanitarian and human rights challenges in the hemisphere. According to the [Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform \(R4V\)](#), by mid-2025 nearly 6.87 million Venezuelan people were displaced in 17 countries of the region. This figure has remained at stable but high levels, reflecting a pattern of permanence in host countries and of growing complexity in processes of regularization and access to rights.

At the national level, the official figures of migration institutes mark the magnitude of the phenomenon. In Colombia, [Migración Colombia](#) maintains as a reference the 2.84 million Venezuelans reported up to February 2024, without an updated cut in 2025, but which serves as a basis for humanitarian response planning. In [Peru](#), the National Superintendence of Migration reported 1.25 million people with regular status up to October 2024, a figure that rises to more than 1.5 million if the population in irregular status is included. In [Chile](#), the National Statistics Institute and the National Migration Service recorded 1.91 million foreign residents at the end of 2023, Venezuela being one of the main countries of origin. In [Ecuador](#), the consolidated figure amounts to 440,000 Venezuelan people, while in [Brazil](#) the migration authority confirmed that in 2024 Venezuelans represented the nationality with the most entries, with 94,726 registrations in that year. In [Argentina](#), under the special regime implemented in 2024, 7,528 residencies had been granted to Venezuelan people up to January 2025.

The impact in the northern hemisphere has also been significant. In Mexico, reports from the Migration Policy Unit and the [Mexican](#) Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) confirm that Venezuela remains among the main nationalities applying for asylum. In the [United States](#), since the beginning of 2025, more restrictive measures in migration have been applied. Until recently the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelan nationals was in force, but it is in the process of termination. The 2023 designation has already been revoked, and the 2021 designation will be officially terminated on November 7, 2025. Some groups could remain temporarily protected under ongoing litigation.



### 1.5.2. Emergence of the reverse migratory flow

In parallel, and as a direct consequence of the tightening of migration policies in North America and of the [restrictions imposed in the Darién jungle](#), an unprecedented phenomenon has been observed: reverse migration. Between January and August 2025, while irregular passage to the north through Darién was reduced by 97%, more than 14,000 people were returned or undertook journeys back from Mexico and the United States toward countries of the south, mainly by land and sea through Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia. According to interviews conducted in the joint [mission of the National Human Rights Institutions](#) of these countries, 97% of the people in reverse transit were Venezuelan.

The profile of those returning shows heightened vulnerability. According to IOM data, 37% report critical economic needs, in contrast with 13% on the route northward. The motives for this forced return are related mainly to the change in U.S. migration policy (46%), the impossibility of entering that country (49%), the exhaustion of economic resources (34%), fear of being detained or deported (17%), and experiences of violence and abuse in transit (27%).

The conditions of return are marked by systematic human rights violations. Many of the people interviewed recounted having suffered kidnappings, extortion, robberies, and sexual violence, particularly during their passage through Mexico and Guatemala, as well as abuses in the Darién jungle. Monitoring also verified that the reverse routes are controlled by human trafficking networks, which offer “packages” of return charging high sums, and which in many cases are the same organizations that previously profited from transit northward. Transfers in small, precarious boats without minimum safety conditions were also documented, with serious incidents already recorded.

In terms of international protection, the deficiencies are alarming. In Panama and Colombia, most people in reverse transit did not receive information about their right to apply for refuge, and cases of expulsions and deportations from Mexico and the U.S. were recorded even when applications were pending resolution. The report also underscores that the reduction of international cooperation funds, especially from the U.S., forced NGOs and UN agencies to suspend humanitarian programs, widening protection gaps along the route and exposing returned people to conditions of hunger, lack of health protection, and absence of safe shelter.

It must be added, for the understanding of the phenomenon, that the reverse migration of Venezuelans is not a “voluntary return to the country.” The majority of people interviewed in the [report of the ombudsman offices](#) did not express the intention of resettling in the country of origin, but rather were forced to return southward because they could not advance northward (U.S. or Mexico), due to deportations, lack of resources, or violence in transit. Therefore the goal is usually relocation in third Latin American countries.

Many plan to remain in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Brazil, or Argentina, depending on family networks, job opportunities, and regularization options. Monitoring showed that numerous people remain stranded in intermediate points (Costa Rica, Panama, northern Colombia), seeking resources to continue their displacement toward a country where they can establish themselves. In addition, the report notes that this return “constitutes, to a great extent, a forced return without guarantees, which reflects the absence of safe pathways of migratory regularization and of international protection in the region.” Several testimonies reflect frustration, but not the expectation of reinsertion in Venezuela, rather the need to “reframe” their journey in another country of the region.

This double panorama—the massive permanence in host countries and the emergence of the reverse migratory flow—reflects the structural crisis of



Venezuelan human mobility. On one hand, millions of people face difficulties of integration and access to rights in Latin America. On the other, those who tried to move northward now find themselves forced to return in even more precarious conditions, which constitutes a cycle of systematic violation of human rights and raises the urgent need for coordinated protection responses at the regional level.

### 1.5.3. **Venezuelans in the European Union: Increases within limited protection**

According to the report of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) "[Latest Asylum Trends: January – June 2025](#)", released on September 5, Venezuela would have become the country that introduced the most asylum applications in the first semester in the European Union, surpassing Syrian citizens, who during recent years had been the ones submitting the most applications.

In the first semester of 2025, approximately 49,000 Venezuelans applied for asylum in the EU+, an increase of 31% compared with the same period in 2024. According to the EUAA, "Spain continues to be the main destination, receiving the majority of Venezuelan applications due to the common language, the existing diaspora, and the practice of granting national humanitarian protection to those who do not meet the requirements to be considered refugees. For this institution, the continuation of 'the deep economic and political crisis' in the Latin American country would explain the increase in applications. Given the changes in U.S. migration policies, and the tightening of obstacles and visa requirements in Latin American countries, 'it is not surprising that Venezuelans are seeking protection options in the EU+, especially considering their visa exemption and their cultural ties with Spain,'" according to the agency.

In the first months of 2025, in order of importance, the countries that received the most asylum applications from Venezuelans were Spain, Italy, and Germany. Of the total, Venezuelans who filed an asylum application for the first time were 48,061 people, representing 98.6% of the total applications received. Of the total of these applications, 24,196 were processed, while adding the accumulated from the previous year there would be 110,321 applications pending resolution. 422 applications were withdrawn from the system (because the petitioner decided not to continue with the process, left the country, or did not attend the interviews), while 28 cases of "resettlement arrivals" were recorded (refugees who arrive in an EU+ country through an organized resettlement program, normally in cooperation with UNHCR).

It must be clarified that the recognition rate for Venezuelans for the figure of asylum in the European Union is 0.02%. This means that out of every 10,000

applications submitted, barely two receive formal refugee status. That figure does not mean that Venezuelans are not receiving any type of protection. In many EU member states, Venezuelans usually receive humanitarian permits or national residence (for humanitarian reasons, health, non-refoulement, etc.), which are not counted as “recognition” in EUAA statistics, but are added under the figure of “Other forms of national protection.”

According to EUAA statistics, there are countries that have a recognition rate much higher than that of Venezuelans. For example, Haiti has a positive recognition rate of 0.86%, Mali of 0.79%, and Ukraine of 0.72%.

Granting refugee status implies a broader, more stable, and more costly package of rights, while national humanitarian protections allow States to offer minimal relief, less costly and more politically controllable. When a State grants “refugee” status, it assumes clear and costly obligations: Long-term residence (normally 3 or 5 years renewable); Full access to social and economic rights: education, health, work, social security; Integration programs financed with public resources (language, housing, labor insertion); and Family reunification: if a Venezuelan is recognized as a refugee, he must also be able to bring his spouse and children.

#### 1.5.4. **Human trafficking in the Venezuelan human mobility crisis**

In September 2025 Transparencia Venezuela en el Exilio released its report “[Human Trafficking in Venezuela. Between Misery and Corruption.](#)” The report documents that Venezuelan migration, which exceeds 7 million displaced persons, has become one of the main factors of vulnerability to human trafficking. The absence of protection policies, obstacles to obtaining valid documentation, and economic precariousness push thousands of migrants to high-risk routes, where they are captured by criminal networks.

Among the main modalities identified stand out the sexual exploitation of women and adolescents, forced labor in informal sectors (illegal mining, agriculture, construction, domestic service), as well as the co-optation of boys, girls, and adolescents for criminal activities. Neighboring countries—in particular Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and the island States of the Caribbean—appear as the main destinations of exploitation, confirming Venezuela as a country of origin, transit, and destination of trafficking.

The phenomenon is aggravated by systematic corruption at border crossings, ports, and airports, where civilian and military officials act as facilitators of these networks. Impunity is almost absolute: despite thousands of complaints

collected by civil society, judicial processes against traffickers are scarce and without effective results.

As a result, forced Venezuelan mobility translates not only into massive displacement, but also into a high-risk environment of modern slavery and transnational exploitation, where migrants are treated as merchandise in an illicit market that operates with state tolerance.

#### 1.5.5. **Conclusions on Venezuelan human mobility**

The mobility of Venezuelan people in the region continues to be one of the most significant and complex phenomena in human rights on the continent. Despite the reduction of irregular crossings northward, recorded after the closure of Darién and the tightening of migration policies in the United States and Mexico, the migratory flow has not stopped. On the contrary, it has transformed into new modalities of displacement, among them the reverse flow documented along the Costa Rica–Panama–Colombia route, which reflects forced returns southward in conditions of high vulnerability and without protection guarantees.

In the coming months, the trend points to a persistence of forced mobility in Latin America. The Venezuelan exodus will remain with greater emphasis in Andean and Southern Cone countries, where host communities are already consolidated. The reduction of humanitarian funding and the saturation of state care systems deepen the risks of discrimination, labor exploitation, and human trafficking, especially for those returning from the north with fewer resources and greater experiences of violence.

The hypothesis of a democratic transition in Venezuela does not automatically translate into the end of migration. In the short term it could even produce new departures, motivated by fear of reprisals or the persistence of precarious conditions. Only in the medium and long term, with effective guarantees of security, justice, and socioeconomic reintegration, could voluntary and progressive returns be generated. This process, if it occurs, will require clear state policies of reintegration and international accompaniment.

In the face of this panorama, the international community faces an unavoidable challenge:

- Maintain and expand international protection mechanisms, avoiding the abrupt termination of programs such as TPS in the United States and guaranteeing real access to asylum in host countries.
- Ensure sustained and sufficient financing for humanitarian agencies and local organizations that cover basic needs along the route.

- Promote regional integration policies that recognize documents, facilitate labor mobility, and ensure essential rights to health and education.
- Establish humanitarian channels of voluntary and safe return, in preparation for scenarios of eventual political transition in Venezuela.

In conclusion, Venezuelan migration in the region is in a phase of readjustment marked by new vulnerabilities and risks. The duty of States and of the international community is to guarantee that these dynamics do not translate into a deepening of the humanitarian crisis, but into real opportunities for protection, dignity, and integration for millions of displaced persons.

### **Summary of the data from the report**

- Electoral participation and results
  - I) 29% real participation (over the Electoral Register).
  - II) 85% of the 335 mayoralties in dispute ended up in the hands of the ruling party.
  - III) Women mayors: 59 (18% of the total).
  - IV) 83% of the council seats (2,006 positions) in the hands of the ruling party.
  - V) 6,273,531 votes cast (44% of “active voters” according to the official manipulated figure).
  - VI) 14,258,025 “active voters” (figure officially used).
  - VII) 21.5 million registered voters in the Electoral Register (real base).
- Drug trafficking
  - I) 24% of the world's cocaine transited through Venezuela in 2023 (639 tons).
  - II) Projection 2024: more than 700 tons.
  - III) Wholesale price in the Caribbean: USD 12,810 per kg.
  - IV) Gross revenues in 2024: USD 8.185 billion.
  - V) Concerns over attacks on vessels in the Caribbean Sea, which have not respected the proportional use of force nor due process against persons accused of participating in drug trafficking activities.



- Migration
  - I) 6.87 million displaced Venezuelans in 17 Latin American countries (mid-2025).
  - II) Reverse migration (Jan–Aug 2025): more than 14,000 forced returns from Mexico and the U.S.
  - III) 97% were Venezuelans.
  - IV) 37% critical needs vs. 13% on the northward route.
  - V) Motives: 46% change in U.S. migration policy; 49% impossibility of entry; 34% lack of resources; 17% fear of detention; 27% violence.
  - VI) European Union (1st semester 2025): 49,000 asylum applications (+31% compared to 2024).
  - VII) 48,061 were “first time applications” (98.6%).
  - VIII) 24,196 processed; 110,321 pending.
  - IX) Recognition rate as refugees: 0.02% (≈2 out of every 10,000).
- Freedom of expression
  - I) January–August 2025: 167 violations (Espacio Público).
  - II) Journalists detained (Sept 2025): 18.
  - III) Media affected: Telecolor (July 3), Supercable (Aug 18), TRT (Aug 29, 9 workers dismissed).
  - IV) Freedom of association and assembly
  - V) Detentions (Jun–Aug 2025): 44 people from political parties: 12 women (27.2%).
  - VI) 15 released (33.3%).
  - VII) By party: Vente (22), Con Venezuela (9), PJ (6), VP (1), MUC (1), AREPA (1), UNT (1), 600K (1), PCD (1), Zulia Humana (1).
  - VIII) Human rights defenders detained in August and September: 4 (Martha Lía Grajales, Rusbelia Astudillo, Roberto Campero, Pedro Hernández).
  - IX) Oil workers detained (Nov 2024 – Sept 2025): 101.
  - X) Union and professional leaders detained (Sept 2025): 15.
  - XI) Human rights defenders detained (Sept 2025): 12 (JEP).
  - XII) Precautionary measures IACHR year 2025: 40 precautionary measures in total, 25 on Venezuela (62.5%).
- Arbitrary detentions
  - I) Jun–Aug 2025: 71 arbitrary detentions, 22 women (31%).
  - II) 45 linked to political parties (63.3%).
  - III) Average: 0.7 per day (1 every 31 hours).
  - IV) States with most cases: Lara (12), Capital District (11), Bolívar (10).

- v) 23 released.
- vi) Totals up to Sept 15, 2025: 1,056 political prisoners (JEP), 156 women (14.7%).
- vii) Hostage diplomacy (Sept 2025): 41 foreigners and 48 binational detainees (JEP); 48 foreigners and 41 binational (Foro Penal).
- Enforced disappearances
  - i) Jun–Aug 2025: 32 of the 71 detentions (45%) included short-term disappearance.
  - ii) Totals (Sept 2025): 110 cases of short-term disappearances among 1,056 detentions.

(\*) Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento es una denominación genérica mediante la cual, ante la total ausencia de estado de derecho, varias organizaciones nacionales de derechos humanos realizan investigaciones y se posicionan públicamente, protegiendo a sus miembros dentro de Venezuela.



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