



# **VENEZUELA: A PLAYBOOK FOR DIGITAL REPRESSION**

By Iria Puyosa, Andrés Azpúrua, and Daniel Suárez Pérez

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The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world’s leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

July 2024

Cover art: Generated by the DFRLab using Adobe Firefly.

**ISBN-13:**

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# Venezuela: A playbook for digital repression

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# Executive Summary

Venezuela is considered a textbook case of democratic erosion in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Once the most vigorous democracy in Latin America and a rare case of a democratic petrostate, Venezuela started down a slow path toward autocracy twenty-five years ago. It also became a model for digital authoritarianism and an exporter of democratic backsliding to the rest of the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

The media landscape in Venezuela has undergone significant changes since 2009, resulting in fragmentation and censorship. The rise of government-run media and state control through ownership changes or censorship mechanisms led independent journalists to migrate to small internet outlets. The country's economy collapsed after 2015, causing further and significant shrinkage of Venezuela's media ecosystem. The aftermath of the 2017 cycle of protests saw another significant shift in the media landscape, with surviving newscasts characterized by censorship and heavily biased coverage in favor of the ruling party. In addition, censorship has caused the closure of many radio stations, leaving many areas without access to local or regional news. The National Telecommunications Commission in Venezuela routinely censors the use of certain topics and words during programming, and also bans interviews with democratic opposition leaders. It prohibits public coverage of corruption allegations or human rights violations attributed to state officials or their family members, coverage of citizen protests or demonstrations against the regime, and discussion of international courts and other human rights entities.

Due to widespread censorship, journalists have found on-the-ground alternatives to remain connected with their audiences. New media strategies include distributing news content using channels other than websites, such as sending email newsletters, delivering community-based

news on the streets and public transit, or publishing exclusively on social media platforms. Indeed, social media and messaging platforms have become leading channels for accessing news in Venezuela. Instagram and Facebook are the platforms most used by average Venezuelans. However, journalists and politicians prefer Twitter (now X) as a source for breaking news and current-events commentary. Recently, as in much of the world, TikTok has grown significantly more popular in Venezuela and is increasing its reach, especially among politically disengaged youth. Venezuelan activists use social media to connect communities across regions of the country and to call for protests.

The use of WhatsApp is prevalent in Venezuela, with more than half of the country's population connecting daily. WhatsApp has become the primary channel for political news for 7.7 percent of the population and has become a space for debating public affairs. The platform's encrypted and private structure offers some protection from governmental surveillance, making it safer for conversations on political topics.

The regime of President Nicolás Maduro has been persecuting dissidents, undermining democratic freedoms. Maduro's rule has been characterized by surveillance, harassment, and arbitrary imprisonment of dissidents, including journalists and human rights defenders. The regime has increasingly curtailed freedom of speech online through restrictive laws, including the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media (RESORTE-ME) and the "Law against Hate." The RESORTE-ME law prohibits electronic media from publishing information aimed at promoting distress among citizens, while the Law against Hate penalizes war propaganda and alleged hate speech, which usually refers to criticisms of the regime expressed on social media.

1 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2019).

2 Lisa Schirch, ed., *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy: The Tectonic Shift* (London: Routledge, 2021); Marianne Kneuer, "Exporting the Chavista Model: The Venezuelan Case for Autocracy Promotion in the Region," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 41, 1 (2022), 123–140, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/blar.13260>.

The targeting of journalists, human rights defenders, and activists by information operations linked to the Maduro regime involves coordinated weaponization of media and stigmatization. The attacks sometimes escalate to police detention or judicial prosecution without due process. Reports indicate that Venezuelan security forces carried out at least eighteen thousand extrajudicial killings between 2016 and May 2019. According to the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the work of journalists in Venezuela is carried out amidst stigmatization, harassment, and threats. Nongovernmental organizations, such as Espacio Público, IPYS Venezuela, and CEPAZ, have reported continuous violations of freedom of speech and online harassment faced by media workers, human rights activists, politicians, and ordinary citizens. Additionally, high-ranking state officials use their social media accounts and appearances on mainstream media to stigmatize and harass journalists and civil society activists.

There have been several coordinated defamation campaigns against journalists using social media, troll accounts, and fringe websites. This report includes three cases in which political persecution and the manipulation of the information space were deployed together. These cases exemplify the typical persecution practices of the Venezuelan state and its allies. The first, the case of Roland Carreño, highlights the co-option of the judicial system to suppress electoral participation and target political opponents in Venezuela, as well as state-sponsored homophobia and hate speech by high-ranking regime officers. In the second case, that of Javier Tarazona, the government persecuted one of its own citizens for criticizing the armed forces and the linkages between political power and non-state armed groups. The final case, that of Nancy Herrera, exemplifies how lack of independent media coverage enables ecocide and the violation of indigenous rights in the Orinoco Mining Arc.

The Maduro regime orchestrated intense disinformation campaigns during and after Venezuela's primaries elections in October 2023. Female politicians running in the opposition primaries—including María Corina Machado, Delsa Solórzano, and Tamara Adrián—were targeted with derogatory remarks about their appearances and capabilities. Politicians in Maduro-controlled institutions and members of his Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV, or United Socialist

Party of Venezuela) were behind the attacks against presidential candidate Machado. Meanwhile, National Assembly candidate Adrián was targeted with transphobic attacks, particularly on TikTok.

Venezuela's state-sponsored disinformation operations involve the use of social media, state media, public diplomacy, foreign influencers, and Venezuela-sponsored organizations in target countries. For-hire disinformation agents with ties to the regime and generative artificial intelligence (AI) are also parts of the regime toolkit. In February 2023, Venezuela became the first country in the Western Hemisphere to deploy AI-generated video in a state-sponsored disinformation campaign. House of News, an English-language YouTube channel, featured a series of videos about the supposed economic recovery in Venezuela, which it said was characterized by a consumption boom and many tourists visiting the country.

Venezuelan operations target not only domestic audiences but audiences in other countries, which includes interfering in other Latin American countries' elections and attempting to influence judiciary decisions in African countries. Venezuela, alongside Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia, undertakes information campaigns pushing for the lifting of sanctions for human rights violations. The Maduro regime, Russia, and China have also coordinated to spread narratives favorable to authoritarian countries while attacking international human rights standards. Among these operations are those fostering the multipolar world narrative and the emerging leadership of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The privacy of communications in Venezuela has been seriously eroded, placing journalists, rights defenders, activists, and politicians at severe risk of surveillance—and, potentially, reprisal. The state surveillance apparatus seems to work as a dragnet, capturing specific types of data from large numbers of Venezuelans while also performing highly targeted surveillance, trying to capture as much information as possible from a more select group of targets, sometimes using multiple methods simultaneously. The various mechanisms for widespread surveillance deployed by the Venezuelan state include the Homeland System, a digital control system that includes an identification card, an app, and a web portal, which collects massive amounts of personal data about citizens. The Maduro regime has also

invested in social media monitoring, messaging app monitoring, wiretapping and interception of phone communications, monitoring of internet traffic, cellphone network monitoring, software for retrieving information stored in seized digital devices, and street video surveillance. Thus, the Venezuelan intelligence corps has extensive access to intercepted communications, including location, from cell phone operators, largely without checks or balances. Also, Venezuelan state actors have conducted state-sponsored phishing attacks against journalists, opposition politicians, and civil society actors for years. These attacks are designed to obtain personal information from internet users unaware that they are targets.

Access to the internet is limited by decaying infrastructure, a result of more than a decade of public policies leading to disinvestment. Because of certain market liberalization, internet service offerings improved from 2020 to 2023, but high costs compared to average wages make the new internet plans unaffordable for most of the population.

The Maduro regime blocks websites as a means of controlling access to information and censoring content. Different types of technical blocks are used to affect user connections. More than one hundred uniform resource locators (URLs) are blocked, including forty-six news sites. Political commentary and human rights defense websites are also blocked. Virtual private networks (VPNs) and other censorship-circumvention tools are restricted. These blocks are ordered *ex officio* by the telecommunication regulatory agency National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) without due process or a legal basis. The blocks restrict citizens' freedom of information, education, access to quality information, and freedom of association.

Control of the information space, widespread surveillance, and digital repression are significant pillars of the regime's survival. Maduro is counting on this, along with electoral manipulation and judicial control, to remain in power. Nonetheless, a cohesive democratic coalition mobilizing the population across the country has a serious chance of making the July 28 election the starting point for a transition toward re-democratization, even if Maduro attempts to rig the results.

# Introduction

Venezuela's descent into autocracy serves as a cautionary tale for democracies worldwide. In the 1980s, Venezuela was the shining example of a consolidated democracy in Latin America, boasting a multi-party system, free and fair elections, and independent institutions. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Venezuelan government was one of the primary actors in fostering transitions from dictatorships to democracy in South America and Spain and promoting peace processes in Central America.

Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1998, however, marked a turning point. Under his rule, democratic institutions began to erode. Chávez stacked the country's Supreme Court with loyalists, weakened checks and balances, and used the country's oil revenue to consolidate power. Independent media faced intimidation and legal pressure, and opposition figures were stifled. By the time Chávez died in 2013, Venezuela was no longer a functioning democracy. From 2002 onward, Chavismo—his namesake movement—became a model for aspiring authoritarians, demonstrating how to exploit democratic processes to subvert them from within. Venezuela's oil wealth allowed Chávez to prop up allied governments and weaken democratic institutions in other Latin American countries. Chavismo influenced elections, fostering unrest and undermining democratic institutions in several Latin American countries. It provided financial and political support to leftist candidates aligned with its ideology, contributing to electoral victories for Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia, among others.

Following Chávez's death in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, accelerated the dismantling of Venezuelan democratic institutions. Elections were blatantly rigged, political opponents were jailed or exiled, and human rights abuses became commonplace. Maduro relied on repression, the manipulation of the economy, and social control to consolidate power. Venezuela's economic collapse further fueled the authoritarian turn, with

kleptocracy and humanitarian emergency becoming hallmarks of the Maduro era.

Since 2003, the successive Chávez and Maduro regimes have forged close ties with other authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia, Iran, Cuba, and China. These alliances have enabled mutual support for their interests in international forums, deflecting criticism of human rights violations, sharing know-how for repression, and working together to evade sanctions. This network of authoritarian allies has helped Maduro to stay in power despite opposition efforts challenging his lack of legitimacy. In return, Venezuela has provided a foothold and facilitated influence in the Americas for its extra-hemispheric authoritarian allies.

As a state sponsor of disinformation, Venezuela systematically distorts and manipulates information to further its political agenda. This includes fabricating and disseminating false or misleading narratives about political opponents, economic conditions, and social issues, as well as using disinformation to discredit international organizations and foreign governments critical of the regime. In addition to its domestic efforts, Venezuela is also known for exporting its tactics of state-sponsored disinformation to other countries in the region. The government has been accused of using social media to interfere in elections and promote political instability in neighboring countries. Venezuelan officials have also trained and advised other governments on how to use digital tools for political control, further solidifying the country's role in the global spread of digital autocracy and state-sponsored disinformation.

The Maduro regime's extensive and sophisticated use of technology to suppress dissent and control information includes a combination of surveillance systems and repressive tactics like internet censorship and harassment of journalists, alongside the strategic dissemination of propaganda through state-controlled channels and social media manipulation. This multifaceted approach allowed the regime to maintain a tight grip on the narrative



and consolidate its power, effectively demonstrating the detrimental impact of digital autocracy on a nation's democratic fabric.

Since 2019, the Venezuelan regime has escalated its efforts to carry out repression beyond its borders. These activities include intimidation, physical violence by regime supporters in other countries, and more complex cross-border operations such as kidnapping and forcibly returning exiles to Venezuelan prisons. There have even been cases of assassination, like that of Lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Chile.<sup>3</sup> These actions not only violate human rights but also undermine international norms and create security challenges for countries hosting exiled individuals.

Similarly, Venezuela's regime has been accused of playing a significant role in fostering transnational crime, both directly and indirectly. The regime has fostered alliances with criminal organizations, both domestic and international, to maintain power and generate illicit revenue. These alliances have fueled a range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, illegal mining, and money laundering, with detrimental consequences for Venezuela and the international community. One of the most concerning aspects of Venezuela's involvement in transnational crime is its relationship with Colombian armed groups like Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents and the National Liberation Army (ELN).<sup>4</sup> These groups have found safe haven in Venezuelan territory, where they engage in drug production and trafficking, as well as illegal mining operations. The Venezuelan government has been accused of providing these groups with protection and logistical support in exchange for financial benefits and political leverage.

Venezuela's kleptocracy has also created instability and uncertainty in the country's energy sector.<sup>5</sup> Corruption and a lack of transparency deter foreign

investment, hindering the development of the country's vast oil reserves. This not only limits its economic potential but has also affected energy markets that previously counted on Venezuelan oil exports.

Illegal gold mining has become a major source of illicit revenue for the Venezuelan government and its criminal allies. The regime has been accused of using state resources to support illegal mining operations, which have caused widespread environmental damage and human rights abuses. The proceeds from this illicit trade are often laundered through international financial systems, further entrenching corruption and undermining the global fight against financial crime. The Maduro regime has actively promoted and profited from illegal mining activities in the Orinoco Mining Arc and the Venezuelan Amazon.<sup>6</sup> These operations, often carried out by state-backed actors or criminal groups with government connections, have led to widespread deforestation, water pollution, and soil degradation. The use of toxic chemicals like mercury in gold extraction has further poisoned ecosystems and harmed indigenous communities. Environmental agencies have been weakened or dismantled, and environmental laws are rarely enforced. This has created a climate of impunity for illegal miners and other actors involved in environmental crimes. This crisis not only affects Venezuela but also has regional and global implications, as it contributes to biodiversity loss and widespread deforestation that diminishes global carbon-capture capacity.<sup>7</sup>

Separately, the forced migration of nearly 8 million Venezuelans due to the ongoing socio-political crisis presents a complex and multifaceted challenge for the Western Hemisphere.<sup>8</sup> The Venezuelan migration crisis has created challenges for host countries, particularly in terms of managing border security and providing humanitarian

3 Natalia Ramos, Vivian Sequera, and Alexander Villegas, "Chile Says Killing of Venezuelan Opposition Figure in Santiago Was Political," Reuters, April 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/chile-says-killing-venezuelan-opposition-figure-santiago-was-political-2024-04-12/>.

4 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Venezuela," US Department of State, December 7, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/venezuela/#:~:text=In%20Venezuela%2C%20ELN%20has%20been,since%20FARC%20demobilized%20in%202017.>

5 "Chavismo, INC. The Gears of Bolivarian Capitalism," Transparencia Venezuela, CONECTAS, and the Rebel Alliance investigates (ARI), September 2020, <https://chavismoinc.com/en/>.

6 Mariel Lozada, "How They Did It: Uncovering a Vast Network of Illegal Mining in Venezuela," Pulitzer Center, June 2, 2022, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-they-did-it-uncovering-vast-network-illegal-mining-venezuela>.

7 "Venezuela Faa118/119 Tropical Forest and Biodiversity Analysis," US Agency for International Development, June 2022, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00ZKHH.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZKHH.pdf).

8 "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela," Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela, last updated November 30, 2023, <https://www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants>.

assistance.<sup>9</sup> Criminal networks have also exploited the migration crisis for human trafficking, smuggling, and other illicit activities, which all pose security challenges for both migrants and host communities.<sup>10</sup> The sudden arrival of large numbers of migrants has strained the public services of host countries, particularly in healthcare and education. The integration of these migrants has led to social and political tensions, including xenophobia and discrimination, particularly in some South American countries, including Peru, Chile, and Ecuador, with locals expressing concerns about competition for jobs and resources.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, highly skilled Venezuelan migrants have contributed to the economies of host countries by filling labor shortages, boosting productivity, and contributing to economic growth.<sup>12</sup> This has been reported in Colombia, where nearly 3 million Venezuelans live now.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, for Venezuela, the exodus of skilled and young workers has deprived the country of valuable human capital, hindering its development.

The current conditions in Venezuela have not gone unnoticed. The International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation into Venezuela for crimes against humanity, the first case against a Latin American country to advance in the ICC.<sup>14</sup> It sets a precedent for addressing human rights violations in the Western Hemisphere and reinforces the principle of universal jurisdiction for grave crimes. The prospect of international prosecution can deter further human rights abuses and promote respect for international law in other countries experiencing democratic backsliding in the Americas.

Despite its economic collapse, the South American country still holds strategic significance due to its vast oil, gas, gold, and rare-minerals reserves. Meanwhile, Venezuela stands at a critical juncture with its political future uncertain, its economy in ruins, and its population enduring immense hardship. There is significant need for a comprehensive solution to the multipronged crisis.

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9 “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan,” Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela, December 2, 2023, <https://rmp.r4v.info/>.

10 “Study on the Protection Situation of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Caribbean,” Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela, November 2021, [https://www.r4v.info/sites/default/files/2022-02/Protection%20study%20Caribbean%202021\\_0.pdf](https://www.r4v.info/sites/default/files/2022-02/Protection%20study%20Caribbean%202021_0.pdf).

11 Pablo Andrés Rivero, “Yes, but Not Here,” Oxfam International, October 24, 2019, [https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620890/bp\\_yes\\_but\\_not\\_here\\_en\\_xenophobia-migration-venezuela-251019-en.pdf](https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620890/bp_yes_but_not_here_en_xenophobia-migration-venezuela-251019-en.pdf).

12 Carolina Mejía-Mantilla, et al., “Venezuelans in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru—A Development Opportunity,” World Bank–UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, July 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099022024085522704/pdf/P17578013f69d804019f8516ffbb072fc34.pdf>.

13 “Venezuelan Migrants Drive USD 529.1M Boost to Colombia’s Economy: IOM Study,” International Organization for Migration, April 25, 2024, <https://www.iom.int/news/venezuelan-migrants-drive-usd-5291m-boost-colombias-economy-iom-study>.

14 Laura Cristina Dib and Sienna Woo, “Combating Disinformation: Venezuela’s Case Before the International Criminal Court,” Washington Office on Latin America, July 27, 2023, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/combating-disinformation-venezuela-international-criminal-court/>.

# Venezuela, after twenty-five years of Chavismo

Venezuela, once known for its thriving democracy and economic prosperity, has plunged into a deep political, economic, and social crisis in recent years. The roots of Venezuela's decline can be traced back to the era of Hugo Chávez, who held the presidency from 1999 to 2013. During his rule, Venezuela gained significant influence in Latin America. Chávez actively promoted other leftist leaders and the adoption of his twenty-first-century socialist policies in the region.

Chávez's presidency began a tumultuous period in Venezuela's history. He faced conflicts with the media, universities, civil society organizations, labor unions, and opposition parties, all while becoming a prominent figure in the "pink tide" of left-wing leaders that swept across Latin America. Chávez's legacy birthed Chavismo, an ideology characterized by left-wing populism.<sup>15</sup>

In 2013, Nicolás Maduro inherited—and subsequently entrenched—Chávez's autocratic rule. Both Chávez and Maduro deeply undermined Venezuelan political institutions over the last twenty-five years. During these years, the ruling party has deployed a plethora of tactics to clamp down on dissent and protect its stability while establishing and growing alliances with other authoritarian countries worldwide.

Under Maduro's rule, the regime's communication apparatus has consolidated a "digital autocracy," effectively manipulating media and the internet while establishing a punitive system for widespread surveillance and citizen control.<sup>16</sup> In the face of political persecution and the deterioration of

living conditions, civil society and journalists have persisted in providing independent information countering the narratives pushed by the Maduro regime. Venezuela has been navigating a protracted and complex crisis for nearly a decade. Maduro has overseen the collapse of Venezuela's economy, a situation caused by expropriations, exchange controls, mismanagement of the oil industry, and substantial foreign debt.

The country has suffered the largest migration historically seen in the Western Hemisphere. According to United Nations Refugee Agency data, "the Venezuelan exodus" began around 2015.<sup>17</sup> The largest number of forced migrants was recorded in 2018, when 2.5 million people left the country. By June 2024, the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V) reported more than 7.7 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide.<sup>18</sup> This figure is around 21 percent of the total number of Venezuelans at home and abroad. R4V clarifies that the number of refugees and migrants is likely higher, because undocumented migrants may not be registered in some host countries; also, Venezuelans with dual citizenship who moved to the country of their second nationality may not be considered migrants. The primary recipients of Venezuelan migrants were Colombia, Peru, Brazil, the United States, and Chile.

Meanwhile, growing discontent brought on by the increasing authoritarianism and the underlying causes of a humanitarian crisis manifested in successive waves of unrest. In 2017 and 2018, respectively, 9,787 and 12,715 registered demonstrations took place.<sup>19</sup> Politically, 2019 was

15 Kirk Hawkins, "Populism in Venezuela: the Rise of Chavismo," *Third World Quarterly* 24, 6 (2003), 1137, 1160, 2003, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993447>.

16 Daniel Suárez Pérez and Esteban Ponce de León, "Digital Autocracy: Maduro's Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment," Atlantic Council, March 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DigitalAutocracyVEN-FINAL.pdf>.

17 "Forced Displacement Flow Dataset," UN Refugee Agency, last updated October, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/forcibly-displaced-flow-data.html>

18 "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela."

19 "Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2019," Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, January 24, 2020, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-2019>.

tumultuous, with a fresh attempt by the Venezuelan opposition to seize power. In January 2019, Juan Guaidó took the oath as interim president with the support of the National Assembly, earning international recognition but facing challenges in consolidating his authority domestically. That year, popular demonstrations against the regime peaked at 16,739, with nearly half of the protests motivated by demands for democratization.<sup>20</sup> Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Venezuelans kept protesting the regime, staging more than 9,600 demonstrations in 2020.<sup>21</sup>

In 2018, the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC received a request from Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru—all States Parties to the Rome Statute—to investigate the situation of widespread human rights violations in Venezuela from February 2014 onward.<sup>22</sup> In 2020, the ICC prosecutor concluded that there was a reasonable basis to believe that authorities may have committed crimes against humanity in Venezuela in the period under investigation. On June 27, 2023, the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I authorized the prosecution to continue its investigation of the human rights situation in Venezuela.<sup>23</sup>

Although not formally tied, the Office of the ICC Prosecutor investigation corroborated four reports presented by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (UN-FFMV).<sup>24</sup> The UN-FFMV substantiated human rights violations committed since 2014 by Venezuela's military and civilian intelligence services. The reports documented thousands of cases of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence in the context of imprisonment, torture, and other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment

“that may amount to crimes against humanity.”<sup>25</sup> Security forces continued to perpetrate violations of human rights in the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) headquarters, El Helicoide political prison, and a series of covert detention centers across the country. According to the UN-FFMV reports, the military and police perpetrators are implementing plans orchestrated directly by Nicolás Maduro and other high-level individuals in his regime.

Since 2014, four internationally backed negotiation processes between Maduro and the democratic opposition have been held, making limited progress. In August 2021, a new negotiation process—mediated by Norway—between the Unitary Platform and Maduro representatives began. Restoring constitutional order, reforming the judicial system, giving reparations to victims of human rights violations, creating a pathway for free and fair elections, addressing humanitarian needs, and defending Venezuelan territorial sovereignty were the agenda points in the Norway-mediated negotiations.

In its 2021 monitoring visit to Venezuela, the European Union Election Observation Mission noted that the political conditions in Venezuela undermine election fairness. The EU mission highlighted “the arbitrary disqualification of candidates and the rerun elections in the State of Barinas,” “the extensive use of state resources in the campaign,” and “unequal access to the mass media by candidates.”<sup>26</sup> The EU mission monitoring “showed that national media had a strong bias in favour of the ruling party” and “use of public funds to promote its narratives through Twitter.”<sup>27</sup> More specifically, the EU mission pointed to “the blockage of websites,” “smear campaigns against reporters and propaganda operations,” and noted that “some media outlets choose not to

20 Ibid.

21 “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2020,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, January 25, 2021, <https://www.observatoriodedeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/informe-anual-situacion-de-la-conflictividad-en-venezuela-en-2020>.

22 “Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, on the Referral by a Group of Six States Parties Regarding the Situation in Venezuela,” International Criminal Court, September 27, 2018, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-prosecutor-international-criminal-court-fatou-bensouda-referral-group-six-states>.

23 “Situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela I. ICC-02/18,” International Criminal Court, September 17, 2018, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/situations/venezuela-i>.

24 “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” United Nations Human Rights Council, September 20, 2023, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmv/A\\_HRC\\_54\\_57\\_AdvanceUneditedVersion\\_260923.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmv/A_HRC_54_57_AdvanceUneditedVersion_260923.docx).

25 Ibid.

26 “European Union Election Observation Mission Venezuela 2021 Final Report,” European Union Election Observation Mission to Venezuela, February 22, 2022, 9, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu\\_eom\\_ven\\_2021\\_fr\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_eom_ven_2021_fr_en.pdf).

27 Ibid.

provide information to avoid political problems.”<sup>28</sup> In its report, the EU mission recommended lifting digital media blockings. The report emphasized that media must offer plural coverage if competitive, free, and transparent elections are to take place.<sup>29</sup>

In 2022, the victory of left-leaning parties in Colombia and Brazil and the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a shift that bolstered the Maduro regime. The Joe Biden administration engaged with Maduro representatives in direct talks centered on easing US sanctions to enable oil companies to reactivate their operations in Venezuelan joint ventures, as well as the liberation of US citizens held as political hostages in Caracas.

A new phase in the political conflict started in October 2022, when international pressure led Maduro to return to the negotiations mediated by Norway. This new phase in negotiations focused on three substantive points, including

- conditions for fair and competitive presidential elections with international observation;
- creation of a fund with frozen Venezuelan assets that UN agencies would administer to help the country’s infrastructure recover, including infrastructure for water, electricity, hospitals, and schools; and
- easing sanctions to allow US oil companies to reactivate oil operations in Venezuela.<sup>30</sup>

In parallel, the opposition parties dissolved the interim government that was in place from January 2019 through December 2022. This was considered a significant concession to facilitate negotiations to obtain conditions for holding free and fair presidential elections.

On November 26, 2022, the Venezuelan negotiators signed the Second Partial Agreement for the Protection of the Venezuelan People. The agreement established “the basis for creating humanitarian and development assistance programs funded by Venezuelan assets frozen abroad by financial sanctions.”<sup>31</sup> The implementation of the projects outlined in the agreement costs \$3.2 billion. Critical areas for assistance are restoring the public health system, addressing children’s malnutrition, improving public education infrastructure, and rehabilitating the electrical grid. Agencies within the United Nations system were expected to lead implementation. Initial delays were due to the need for financial engineering and legal protections to move the frozen funds without risks from creditor claims in the United States. However, more than a year later, no progress has been made toward implementing the agreement.

Meanwhile, thousands of Venezuelans continued to take to the streets, demanding better labor conditions, social welfare, and access to public services. As of April 2024, the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (Venezuelan Observatory for Social Conflict) had documented 1,569 protests, with 2023 concluding with 6,956, an average of about nineteen protests daily.<sup>32</sup> These protests included rallies, marches, street closures, strikes (including hunger strikes), the use of banners, and other types of demonstrations in public places.

At the same time, the democratic opposition reenergized with the Unitary Platform primaries. The pre-election period was marked by the ruling party attacking candidates and members of the organizing commission. Longtime opposition leader María Corina Machado won in a landslide in the primaries held on October 22, 2023.

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 63–75.

30 “Experts React: As the US Eases Oil Sanctions, Is Venezuela Coming in from the Cold?” Atlantic Council, November 27, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-eases-oil-sanctions-venezuela-chevron-maduro/>.

31 Geoff Ramsey and Ignacia Ulloa Peters, “Getting Venezuela’s Historic Humanitarian Accord Up and Running,” Atlantic Council, August 11, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/getting-venezuelas-historic-humanitarian-accord-up-and-running/>.

32 See: “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en Enero 2024,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, last visited June 10, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-enero-2024>; “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en Febrero 2024,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, last visited June 10, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/destacado/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-febrero-de-2024>; “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en el Primer Trimestre 2024,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, last visited June 10, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-el-primer-trimestre-2024>; “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en Abril de 2024,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, last visited June 10, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/destacado/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-abril-de-2024>; “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2023,” Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, March 11, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-en-venezuela-en-2023>.

During most of 2023, there were no significant advances in the Norway-mediated negotiations. In parallel, the United States sustained secret talks with the Maduro regime in Qatar. On October 17, 2023, Maduro and the Unitary Platform representatives signed an agreement in Barbados on political rights and electoral guarantees. The main points of this agreement were non-interference in the opposition primaries, mechanisms for lifting electoral bans that affect several of the most prominent opposition leaders, an official electoral schedule, and allowing independent international observation to take place. The agreement included two points favoring balance and equal access in the coverage of the presidential election campaign in the media and on social media, although without clarifying whether this includes the lifting of censorship in the media and on the internet. The agreement also included guarantees for the candidates' security, freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement.<sup>33</sup>

Following the signing of the electoral agreement, the United States “[i]ssued a six-month general license temporarily authorizing transactions involving the oil and gas sector in Venezuela” and “a second general license authorizing dealings with Minerven—the Venezuelan state-owned gold mining company.”<sup>34</sup> In exchange, the United States asked for a specific timeline and process for the expedited reinstatement of all potential opposition candidates, and the release of all wrongfully detained US citizens and Venezuelan political prisoners.

Contrary to US expectations, repression against democratic opposition increased after the agreement. Although six people arbitrarily detained for political reasons were released immediately after the signing of the deal, in the following weeks, the regime issued other arrest warrants and incarcerated other democratic activists. The agreements caused considerable infighting among the factions in the ruling party. Because the hardliners control the repression apparatus, the outlook for prisoners' release is grim.

The authorities did not lift the administrative electoral disqualification against candidate Maria Corina Machado. Instead, Maduro offered a complicated process of appeal at the Supreme Court, even though there has never been a judicial ruling that can be appealed concerning Machado's electoral disqualification. In most polls conducted from November 2023 to April 2024, Machado had more than 70 percent of popular support. However, Machado was not allowed to register as a candidate for the presidential election; instead, the Unitary Platform registered retired diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia.<sup>35</sup> Due to a lack of compliance with the agreement, the United States partially snapped back sanctions relief, while keeping options for continuing to authorize transactions related to oil or gas sector operations in Venezuela on a case-by-case basis.<sup>36</sup>

To divert attention from its compromised situation, the ruling party reignited the dispute regarding the Essequibo territory, which Venezuela had reclaimed from neighboring Guyana throughout the twentieth century. Grandstanding on sovereignty claims served the ruling coalition for several reasons. It allowed it to test its ability to mobilize voters by holding a referendum on a subject that should unite the nation. Although nearly all Venezuelans agree with the country's sovereignty over the disputed territory, the referendum turnout was meager, confirming that it would be challenging for the regime to win an election. Nonetheless, the issue helped to distract public opinion from a new wave of repression against democratic activists. Finally, it provided excuses for Maduro's lack of compliance with the Barbados agreement and the bilateral deal with the United States. The episode closed with a meeting with Guyana's prime minister, mediated by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), underscoring how the Organization of American States (OAS) has become irrelevant for any matter concerning Venezuela. The possibility of an escalation in the conflict over the

33 “Acuerdo Parcial para la Promoción de Derechos Políticos y Garantías Electorales para Todos [Partial Agreement for the Promotion of Political Rights and Electoral Guarantees for All],” Norwegian Government Security and Service Organization, October 17, 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/ac03d5655a8448e0a9653cd95d5c7978/garantias-electorales.pdf>.

34 Antony J. Blinken, “Signing of Electoral Roadmap Between the Unitary Platform and Representatives of Maduro,” US Department of State, October 18, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/signing-of-electoral-roadmap-between-the-unitary-platform-and-representatives-of-maduro/>.

35 Mayela Armas, “Edmundo Gonzalez, Venezuela's Low-Profile and Last-Minute Opposition Candidate,” Reuters, April 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/edmundo-gonzalez-venezuelas-low-profile-last-minute-opposition-candidate-2024-04-20/>.

36 “Venezuela Sanctions Relief: Expiration of General License 44,” US Department of State, April 17, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/venezuela-sanctions-relief-expiration-of-general-license-44/>.

Essequibo territory, with the intention of affecting or suspending the presidential elections scheduled for July 28, was a possible scenario at the time of writing this report.<sup>37</sup>

González Urrutia, the candidate replacing opposition leader Machado on the ballot, is currently leading in the polls for the upcoming election. Maduro has little chance of remaining in power without resorting to significant actions to override the will of most of the population.

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37 Ryan C. Berg, et al., "The Essequibo Pressure Cooker: Runaway Nationalism and Maduro's Compellence Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 14, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/essequibo-pressure-cooker-runaway-nationalism-and-maduros-compellence-strategy>.

# Media environment overview

The Venezuelan media environment underwent a drastic transformation between 2009 and 2014. The milestones in that process were the rise of government-run media, state control through ownership change or censorship mechanisms, and the migration of independent journalism toward small internet outlets. These trends shaped the current media ecosystem, which is characterized by fragmentation and censorship.

In addition to censorship, there are labor and economic dimensions to the shrinkage of Venezuela's media ecosystem. Venezuela's economy collapsed in 2015 and is now one-third of what it was in 2014. Journalists' salaries fell dramatically, from an average of \$2,900 monthly in 2014 to \$15 per month in 2018. Even with salaries well below the minimum life expenses, many radio stations in small cities could not afford to keep journalists on the payroll. For this reason, local newscasts extensively reproduced—and continue to reproduce—content from printed newspapers with national circulation, such as *El Universal*, *Últimas Noticias*, and *Correo del Orinoco*, all of which are pro-regime.<sup>38</sup> Since 2020, journalists' salaries have begun to recover, mainly because international cooperation funds make it possible to pay average wages of \$250 per month.

As a consequence of the repression during the 2017 cycle of protests, radio and TV outlets opted for silence. Opinion and interview segments disappeared from their programming, and airtime devoted to standard news coverage fell.<sup>39</sup> Now, surviving newscasts are characterized by censorship, and their coverage is biased toward the ruling party.<sup>40</sup>

In the following subsections, the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) reports on the current trends in censorship in legacy media, including data from the 2023 Unitary Platform primary. Using data from nongovernmental organizations Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela, this report attempts to provide a comprehensive mapping of Venezuela's media ecosystem and the extent of information deserts, and documents changes in news distribution in response to censorship, the role of social media in information consumption, and the growing importance of the use of messaging apps. Finally, this section of the report briefly explores the use of social media as protest spaces.

## Media ecosystem

Espacio Público, a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization that monitors freedom of speech and the right to information, created its Media Mapping project to provide data on the 910 media outlets active in Venezuela as of November 2023.<sup>41</sup> At the time, there were 431 radio stations, thirty-seven broadcast-television stations, twenty cable-television stations, twenty-four printed newspapers, and 394 digital media in a country of 912,050 square kilometers (352,144 square miles) and around 27 million inhabitants. The number of active media outlets in Venezuela was reduced by seventy between December 2021 and November 2023. Censorship has seriously affected radio stations, being one of the main causes that forced the closure of 268 in the same period.<sup>42</sup> Twelve out of twenty-four states have no printed newspapers.

According to their ownership, 10.42 percent of the media outlets belonged to the state, 87.04 percent were private, and 1.22 percent had no reported

38 Interview with Yaya Andueza and María Fernanda Madriz, Servicio de Información Pública, May 2, 2022.

39 Interview with independent journalist and digital rights activist Luis Carlos Díaz, April 29, 2022.

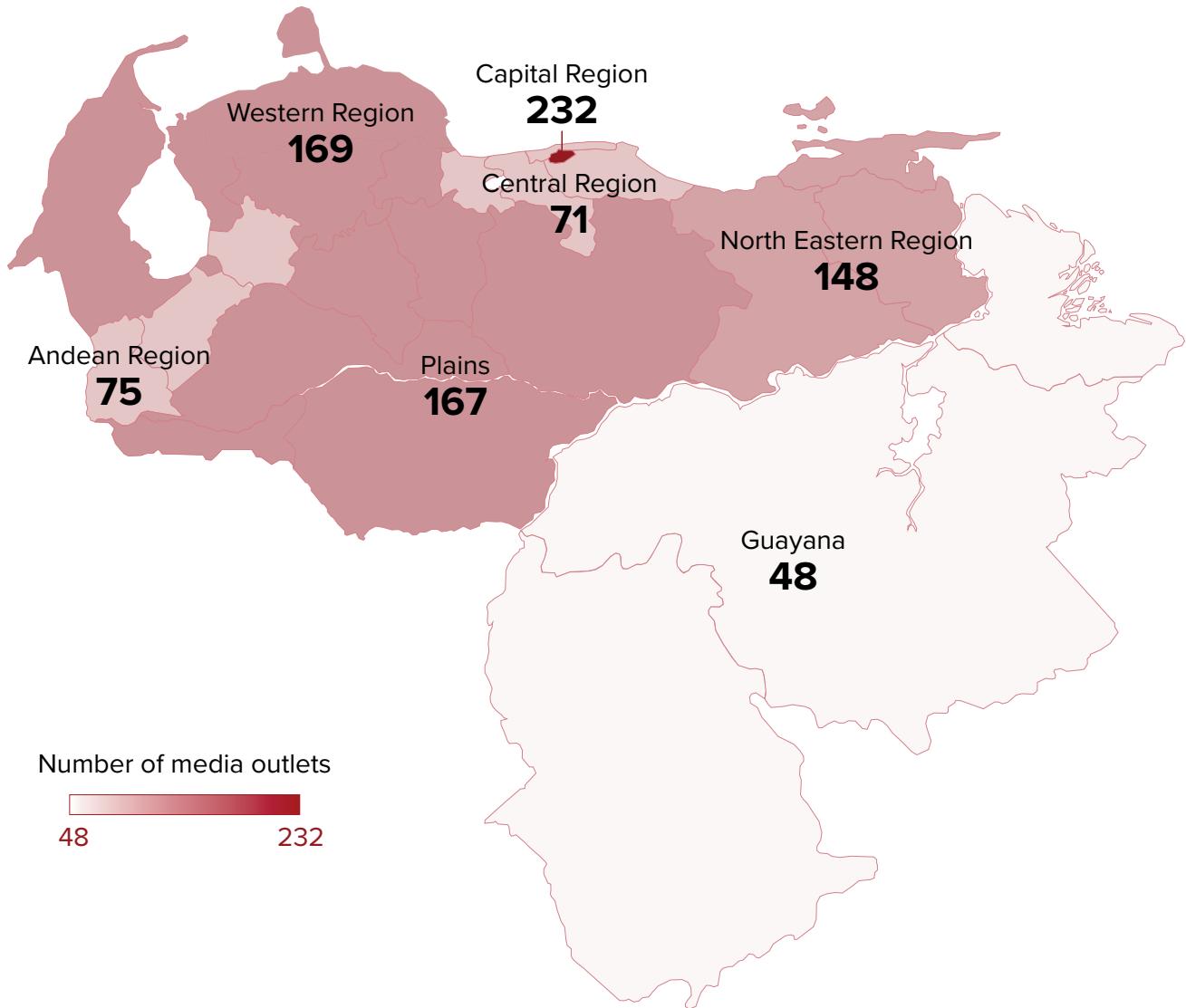
40 Interview with Luis Peche, Sala 58, operations coordinator, May 5, 2022.

41 "Mapa de Medios," Espacio Público, last visited April 10, 2024, <https://espaciopublico.org/medios/>.

42 For more on censorship and closure of radio stations, see: "La Censura Normalizada en la Radio Venezolana [Censorship Normalized in Venezuelan Radio]," Espacio Público, May 2, 2023, <https://espaciopublico.org/la-censura-normalizada-en-la-radio-venezolana/>; "Situación General del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión en Venezuela Enero–Diciembre 2023 [Situation of the Right to Freedom of Expression in Venezuela January–December 2023]," Espacio Público, February 23, 2024, <https://espaciopublico.org/situacion-general-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-en-venezuela-enero-diciembre-2023/>.



**Figure 1.** Map of media outlets active in Venezuela by region until November 2023



Source: DFRLab-generated map graph using Espacio Público's data collected as of November 2023. "Mapa de Medios."

information about ownership. In this classification, private does not mean corporate, for-profit media. Not-for-profit media, such as outlets run by civil society and religious organizations, are included as private media. Moreover, media owned by high-ranking officials in the ruling party and their associated businesses are considered both private and pro-regime.

The 2023 report by the OAS Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights observed the deepening of “silenced zones,” or information deserts, in many Venezuelan municipalities.<sup>43</sup> One hundred and thirty-three municipalities are considered information deserts, where no locally operated media outlet covers local or regional issues. According to IPYS Venezuela, more than 7 million Venezuelans (around 21 percent of the total population) lived in information deserts in 2022, an increase from 2020, when IPYS Venezuela registered 5.2 million Venezuelans affected by a lack of local news.<sup>44</sup>

In Zulia, the country’s second most populous state, nineteen out of twenty-one municipalities are information deserts. This includes the municipalities of La Guajira and Mara, where nearly half of Venezuela’s indigenous population, approximately four hundred thousand people of the Wayuu ethnic group, live. The only active local media outlet in La Guajira is radio station Radio Fe y Alegría, which offers bilingual Wayuu-Spanish programming and works with a network of indigenous citizen correspondents.

The Waraos, the second-largest indigenous group in Venezuela, live in Delta Amacuro, where three municipalities are considered information deserts. The local Radio Fe y Alegría station and the website Tane-Tanae are the only outlets for obtaining local information in this state. Further limiting access to news, Venezuela’s telecom authorities create

interference that prevents people from getting some radio stations’ signal without noise. For example, they assign close frequencies to critical radio stations, thus creating signal interference by virtue of proximity within the frequency range.<sup>45</sup>

In Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela 2022 annual reports, both organizations highlighted the closure of more than one hundred radio stations as a massive act of censorship by the Maduro regime. Espacio Público dedicated a chapter to pointing to government authorities as the main culprits for the closure of 403 media outlets (285 radio stations, eighty-seven print media, nineteen TV networks, and twelve digital platforms) between 2003 and 2022, resulting in the minimal or nonexistent presence of independent media in thirteen out of twenty-four Venezuelan states.<sup>46</sup>

## Censorship in legacy media

CONATEL regularly issues orders for radio and television stations, prohibiting certain topics or words from being used on air or banning interviews with certain individuals.<sup>47</sup> According to investigations by UN-FFMV, CONATEL “issues orders, predominantly through phone calls to radio and television stations, prohibiting certain topics or words from being used on air, or banning interviews with certain individuals. [CONATEL] has prohibited public discussions on alleged corruption or violations attributed to State officials or their family members; references to international courts and human rights mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court or the mission itself (unless it is to discredit these institutions); and coverage of social protests or demonstrations against the Government. has demanded internet service providers to block access to web pages that publish information perceived as critical of the Government.”<sup>48</sup> CONATEL also bans media from using the Spanish words for “dictatorship,” “regime,” “interim government,” and “political prisoners,” and

43 Pedro Vaca, “Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2022. Volume II,” Organization of American States, March 6, 2023, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/reports/IA2022ENG.pdf>.

44 “Relieve, Atlas de Silencio, IPYS Venezuela,” Atlas del Silencio, last visited September 21, 2023, <https://coldfoot.github.io/atlas-del-silencio/relieve/index.html>.

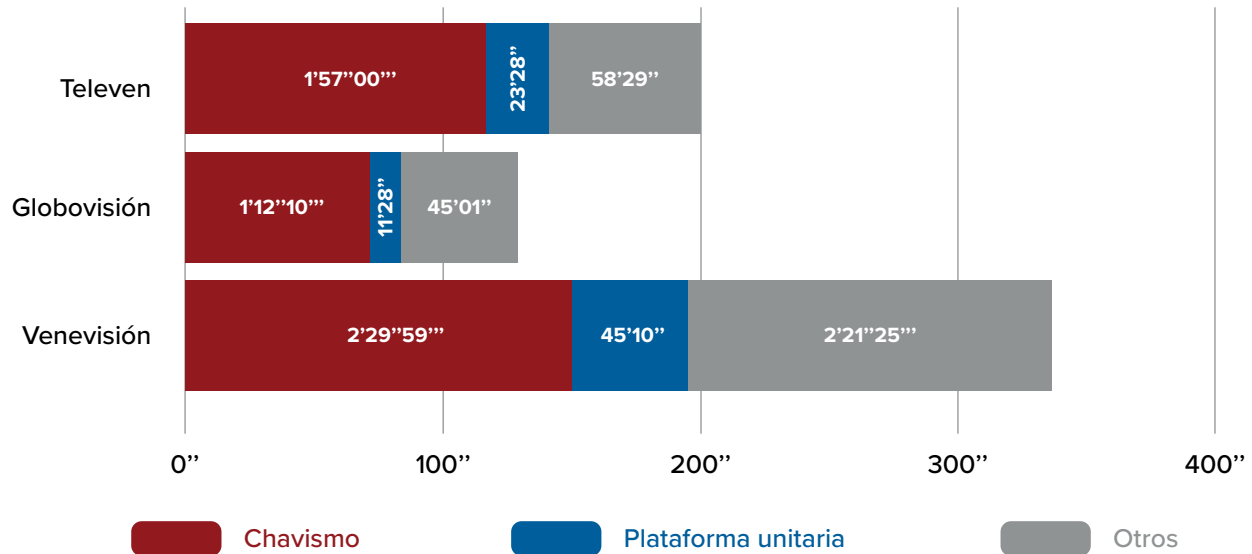
45 Interview with Rodolfo Rico, independent journalist and open-source investigator, May 4, 2022.

46 Carlos Correa, et al., “Informe 2022: Situación del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión e Información en Venezuela [Report 2022: Situation of the Right to Freedom of Expression and Information in Venezuela],” Espacio Público, May 3, 2023, <https://espaciopublico.org/informe-2022-situacion-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-e-informacion-en-venezuela>.

47 Marysabel Rodríguez, “Censura Política en Venezuela: el Caso de las Primarias Opositoras [Political Censorship in Venezuela: the Case of the Opposition Primaries],” *Revista Comunicación* 205 (2024): 85–88, <https://comunicacion.gumilla.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Revista-de-Comunicacion-205.pdf>.

48 “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.”

**Figure 2.** Total minutes of on-air television news coverage by political bloc in November 2021, when local elections were held



Source: "National Media Coverage of the Gubernatorial Election in 2021," Sala 58, November 21, 2020. Graph reprinted with permission.

prohibits interviews with opposition political leaders, human rights defenders, and some social activists.<sup>49</sup>

Media aligned with the Maduro regime have also served as a platform to replicate propaganda and amplify political positions against international institutions. In October 2020, a Medianálisis report analyzed how ten private media outlets aligned with Maduro, regime-controlled media, and news agencies covered the publication of the first UN-FFMV report on human rights violations by the Maduro regime's security forces.<sup>50</sup> The study analyzed articles from the ten media outlets in the days following the report's publication, between September 16–20, 2020. Among the findings, the study concluded that the media used statements by regime officials that did not directly respond to the facts exposed by UN-FFMV and, instead, politicized the news by attacking the UN. The report also highlighted that pro-Maduro media did not contrast the official information and replicated data from

press conferences that journalists not aligned with Maduro were banned from covering.<sup>51</sup>

Sala 58, a Venezuelan consulting agency specializing in politics, analyzed the three national private television newscasts' coverage of the gubernatorial election in 2021 and found a disparity in the airtime favoring the ruling party. In November 2021, an election month, PSUV candidates received 620 minutes on air compared to one hundred minutes of coverage received by the United Democratic Platform candidates and 132 minutes devoted to covering political parties co-opted by the regime.<sup>52</sup>

According to the Sala 58 analysis of the coverage of the opposition primary, all private TV networks gave primacy to statements by María Carolina Uzcátegui, a member of the National Primary Commission (CNP) who was initially in charge of organizing the voting process but resigned in July, alleging that

49 Ibid.

50 Ana Julia Niño Gamboa, "UN Report: A New Enemy, Coverage, and Disinformation on Regime-Aligned Media," Medianálisis, October 19, 2020, <https://disinformation.medianalisis.org/un-report-a-new-enemy-coverage-and-disinformation-on-regime-aligned-media/>; "Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," United Nations Human Rights Council, September 15, 2020, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A\\_HRC\\_45\\_CRP.11.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11.pdf).

51 Niño, "UN Report: A New Enemy, Coverage, and Disinformation on Regime-Aligned Media."

52 "Situational Balance. Incident Report," Sala 58, November 21, 2020.

technical and logistical conditions were not in place to successfully hold a primary election.

TV channel Venevisión focused its coverage of the primaries on interviews with politicians, such as Jose Brito and Gregorio Gutiérrez, affiliated with parties created by Supreme Court of Justice decisions to usurp the names of opposition parties.<sup>53</sup> Separately, every Thursday during the months of August and September, the channel TELEVEN reproduced attacks against the Unitary Platform, the CNP, or the candidates targeted by the PSUV Vice President Diosdado Cabello during his Wednesday show, *Con el Mazo Dando (With the Mallet Hitting)*. TELEVEN also gave coverage to the National Electoral Council's extemporaneous offer to provide technical support if the primaries were postponed until the end of November.<sup>54</sup>

The National Union of Press Workers (SNTP by its Spanish initials) reported that telecommunications regulator CONATEL ordered TV channels and radio stations to stop any coverage of the primary election effective on October 20.<sup>55</sup> On primary election day, October 22, national private television channels did not run the special coverage they have historically run in electoral processes and, instead, maintained their Sunday entertainment programming. In its October 22 programming, twenty-four-hour information and opinion channel Globovisión only mentioned the Unitary Platform primaries to broadcast a statement from Acción Democrática nominee Carlos Prosperí, who said he would not recognize the results. Prosperí obtained less than 5 percent of the vote, and the president of Acción Democrática declared that the party did not support the candidate's allegations against the process.<sup>56</sup>

## Changes in news distribution in response to censorship

New media strategies include distributing news content using channels other than websites. Both established media outlets and newer projects use such strategies, some of them exclusively. These alternate channels include the distribution of audio via messaging apps, sending email newsletters, delivering community-based news on the streets and public transit, or publishing exclusively on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter.<sup>57</sup>

Given widespread censorship, journalists have found on-the-ground alternatives to remain connected with their audiences. Community-oriented projects that attempt to provide local news surged, such as El Bus TV, El Guayoyo de Efecto Cocuyo, the CrónicaUno's Forums Chats, and Quince, Medianalisis's biweekly *dazibao*, a typically handwritten news bulletin in the form of a poster or mural normally posted to public spaces. Initiatives for disseminating verified news via Twitter and WhatsApp have also launched, as in the case of the Public Information Service and ReporteYa.

El Bus TV is probably the most innovative of these projects. It began as an attempt to overcome censorship during the 2017 protests. Given the absence of coverage of the mass protests in traditional media, a group of journalists decided to present live newscasts of what was happening in the country while riding on Caracas buses. In 2018, El Bus TV became a hyperlocal and community-service project. Now, El Bus provides news to underserved neighborhoods in twelve out of the country's twenty-four states, in "the Window" (la Ventana) format—reading news from a house window—in the target sector.

53 Noticias Venevisión, "Entrevista Venevisión: José Brito, diputado de la AN de Primero Venezuela—20 de Agosto de 2021 [Venevisión interview: José Brito, AN deputy for Primero Venezuela—August 20, 2021]," YouTube Video, August 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfOnPPG5b4Y>.

Noticias Venevisión, "En Horas de la Mañana de Este Jueves la Alianza Democrática, Anunció los Nombres de los Candidatos a las Megaelecciones del Próximo 21 de Noviembre...," Facebook, August 19, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=4089155724544514>;

"Venezuela: Rulings Threaten Free and Fair Elections," Human Rights Watch, July 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/07/venezuela-rulings-threaten-free-and-fair-elections>.

54 "Primaria Censurada [Censored Primary]," Sala 58, November 2023, <https://sala58.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Sala-58-Primaria-censurada.pdf>.

55 @sntpvenezuela, "#AlertaSNTP | A esta hora periodistas de distintos estados del país denuncian ante el SNTP las medidas impuestas en distintos medios de radio y TV"SNTP...," Twitter, October 20, 2023, <https://twitter.com/sntpvenezuela/status/1715486192446152873>.

56 "Primaria Censurada [Censored Primary]."

57 The majority of this research was conducted when X was known as Twitter, so the platform will hereafter be referred to by its previous name.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, El Bus TV adopted a new format that allowed for social distancing: the Bus Stop, a mural paper placed at busier corners in low-income neighborhoods. To establish the Bus Stop and the Window, El Bus TV works in partnership with community organizations. Neighbors often invite journalists to share a coffee at their homes to discuss the news with the community.<sup>58</sup>

Before El Bus starts working in a community, it contacts the ruling party's local leaders, the "street bosses," and the members of the communal councils to gain access.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, its journalists have been subject to intimidation: police officers ask to inspect their mobile phones and backpacks, and some of their *dazibaos* have been torn down. But they have managed to resolve these incidents without escalating to arrests or physical violence against reporters. As El Bus TV director Laura Helena Castillo stated in an interview, "the PSUV members and the police officer who lives in the community also need to know when food or vaccines would arrive, so they learn to value the information service provided by the Bus."<sup>60</sup>

In all its formats, El Bus TV maintains an anti-censorship segment called "El Bus TV and the Right to Information," which summarizes investigative work from digital media blocked in Venezuela, such as Armando.info. In this way, "El Bus TV allows low-income Venezuelans who lack internet connectivity to access journalistic investigations into corruption, ecocides, and human rights violations."<sup>61</sup>

El Bus TV's other line of work is service journalism. During the 2020 lockdowns, it focused on gender violence and covering the COVID-19 pandemic from a community perspective.

The forums held by digital media CrónicaUno are another initiative worth highlighting. In 2016, it began hosting in-person community forums at which subject-matter experts explained current issues and answered people's questions. Due to the pandemic lockdowns, as of June 2020, CrónicaUno switched

to a WhatsApp chat-forum format. In April 2021, the forums migrated to Telegram, allowing for a larger number of participants.<sup>62</sup>

The combination of digital and grassroots distribution models, predominantly among these new media initiatives, led these organizations to be interested in fostering media and digital literacy. Civil society organizations (CSOs) whose goal is to promote access to information are adding digital literacy to their objectives and exploring the use of devices and methods to circumvent censorship. These organizations consider literacy in the effective usage of social media to be a necessary competence for participation in public affairs. Moreover, most Venezuelan media experts interviewed consider the improvement of digital literacy as one of the most effective strategies for countering disinformation, which is rampant in the Venezuelan information ecosystem. Jesús Urbina, college professor of journalism and coordinator of the Transparencia Venezuela Zulia chapter, pointed out that "digital literacy has proven to be more efficient than fact-checking" against disinformation.<sup>63</sup> Patricia Spadaro of ReporteYa pointed out that digital-literacy programs focused on enhancing citizens' usage of social media for news consumption have been effective in countering Venezuelans' exposure to government propaganda.

In response to the lack of independent news on television, some media outlets, such as VPI and VivoPlay, stream news online. VPI and VivoPlay started out using their own websites but migrated to livestreaming on YouTube after their sites were blocked. The regime has also ordered the blocking of streaming and audio-distribution services like SoundCloud. Since at least 2019, CANTV has intermittently blocked or restricted access to SoundCloud, the largest audio-hosting platform on the internet. Private internet service providers (ISPs) followed suit and began blocking it on May 9, 2021. The SoundCloud block affects the distribution of audio news capsules online, as well as news reports from the Public Information Service, podcasts, and other newsworthy content. SoundCloud and

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58 Interview with Laura Helena Castillo, El BusTV director and founder, May 13, 2022.

59 "Street bosses" are part of the ruling party structure. On every street or within a residential compound, the government designates one person to keep an eye on their neighbors. Street bosses report to the authorities when residents participate in demonstrations or are members of opposition organizations.

60 Interview with Laura Helena Castillo, May 13, 2022.

61 Ibid.

62 Interview with Norma Rivas, CrónicaUno journalist, May 26, 2022.

63 Jesús Urbina, Transparencia Venezuela, at the digital-literacy roundtable, January 12, 2023.

livestream.com, which had been used for similar purposes, remained blocked at the time of writing.

Another significant trend changing the information ecosystem in Venezuela is the displacement of public debate to semi-private spaces such as WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp's encrypted messaging is the most used digital platform in Venezuela.<sup>64</sup> Nearly 15 million users, more than half of the country's population, connect daily via WhatsApp. For the ordinary citizen, WhatsApp is a primary space for promoting, buying, and selling goods and services.<sup>65</sup> Users can also arrange money exchange from the vastly depreciated Venezuelan bolivar into US dollars, euros, or Colombian pesos.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, according to private polling, the messaging app is also the primary channel for political news for 7.7 percent of the population.<sup>67</sup>

## Social media and closed messaging-app usage

As independent newspapers practically disappeared, critical opinions and news vanished from broadcast TV, censorship proliferated, and the number of independent radio stations declined, many citizens turned to the internet to stay informed. Internet access has thus become essential for the exercise of political and civil rights, in spite of the restrictions imposed by the Maduro regime. With this shift to social media and messaging platforms as a leading source of news, consumption has become a random phenomenon that depends on the content at the top of the feed when a user connects to a given platform. In an interview, journalist and freedom-of-expression activist Luis Carlos Díaz emphasized that, because of these random feeds, a shared public agenda on issues of interest to the entire country is unlikely.<sup>68</sup>

Despite their limited internet access, Venezuelans are still heavy users of social media and messaging applications. Approximately 70 percent of Venezuelans have occasional access to the internet, and 15 million people keep active accounts on at least one social media platform.<sup>69</sup> DataReportal, a platform that registers the use of digital devices and services globally, estimated the number of social media users in Venezuela based on the potential audience above eighteen years of age that can be reached via advertisements. The last report showed that Facebook was the platform with the largest reach as of January 2024, with 14.05 million users. This was followed by TikTok (12.35 million), Instagram (8.15 million), Meta's Messenger (5.20 million), LinkedIn (4.90 million), and X (2.31 million).<sup>70</sup>

IPYS Venezuela's investigation on information deserts, Atlas del Silencio, included a national survey that found that 52 percent of the respondents consume news via social media.<sup>71</sup> Instagram and Facebook were the social media platforms most used by participants to get news, at 46 percent and 36 percent, respectively. Conversely, most Venezuelan journalists prefer Twitter (now X) as a source for breaking news and commentary. However, only 8 percent of those across Venezuela who responded to the December 2022 survey used this platform to get news. A Venezuelan diaspora community made of people who have migrated in recent years is also active on Twitter. In May 2018, the Center for International Development at Harvard University estimated that 2.9 million Venezuelan Twitter users had migrated to other countries in the previous thirteen to fifteen months.<sup>72</sup>

Information published in digital media and opinions shared on Twitter reach most people through WhatsApp. There are also news services that work, mostly or exclusively, on WhatsApp. For example, the Public Information Service has more than thirty

64 Iria Puyosa, et al., "Information Disorders Propagated in Venezuela via WhatsApp and Social Media amid the COVID19 Pandemic," ININCO-Universidad Central de Venezuela—Venezuela Inteligente, 2021, 13, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350849927\\_Information\\_Disorders\\_Propagated\\_in\\_Venezuela\\_via\\_WhatsApp\\_and\\_Social\\_Media\\_amid\\_the\\_COVID19\\_pandemic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350849927_Information_Disorders_Propagated_in_Venezuela_via_WhatsApp_and_Social_Media_amid_the_COVID19_pandemic).

65 Interview with Yaya Andueza and María Fernanda Madriz, Servicio de Información Pública, May 2, 2022.

66 Interview with independent journalist Luis Carlos Díaz, April 29, 2022.

67 "National Opinion Study, Monitoring Venezuela," More Consulting, May 2022.

68 Interview with independent journalist Luis Carlos Díaz, April 29, 2022.

69 Clay Alvino Thomas, "Estadísticas de la Situación Digital de Venezuela en el 2020–2021 [Statistics of Venezuela's Digital Situation in 2020–2021]," Branch, May 15, 2021, <https://branch.com.co/marketing-digital/estadisticas-de-la-situacion-digital-de-venezuela-en-el-2020-2021/>.

70 "Digital 2024: Venezuela," We Are Social and Meltwater, February 23, 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-venezuela>.

71 "IPYS Venezuela," Atlas del Silencio, last visited September 21, 2023, <https://coldfoot.github.io/atlas-del-silencio/relieve/index.html>.

72 Ricardo Hausmann, Julian Hinz, and Muhammed A. Yildirim, "Measuring Venezuelan Emigration with Twitter," Kiel Working Paper, 2018, [https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/growthlab/files/ven\\_emigration\\_cidwp342.pdf](https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/growthlab/files/ven_emigration_cidwp342.pdf).

thousand direct subscribers to its WhatsApp audio bulletins.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Monitoreo Sala 58 continuously monitors news of political importance and distributes it through WhatsApp.

The migration of news and views from open social media to the closed spaces of WhatsApp arose in response to economic (less data consumption) and political (lower risk of political retaliation) reasons.<sup>74</sup> Public debates that, in the past, would have taken place in the media and at universities have moved to WhatsApp groups, where political leaders, journalists, human rights defenders, social activists, and academics interact constantly with lower risk of public exposure, as the platform's encrypted and private structure protects such conversations from governmental surveillance. Well-connected Venezuelans in the diaspora can participate in these debates, but Venezuelans inside the country who lack mobile data connectivity cannot.

Short-form video platform TikTok has grown significantly more popular in Venezuela in the last three years. According to pollster More Consulting, 57 percent of the interviewees in a national survey report that they use TikTok, although most daily users are under thirty years of age.<sup>75</sup> Older TV stars, such as soap opera actresses and variety show hosts from twenty or thirty years ago, are finding new popularity on TikTok. These TV stars used their TikTok accounts to promote candidates for governor and mayor roles in the November 2021 elections, according to several journalists interviewed by the DFRLab.

TikTok's potential impact on public opinion has not gone unnoticed by the regime. Maduro opened a TikTok channel in April 2020, which had garnered more than 1.5 million followers at the time of research. On his channel, Maduro acts as a show host, combining propaganda and news with entertainment content. For example, he dances salsa, tells jokes, and interacts with a tourist robot. Pro-democratization leader Maria Corina Machado is also active on TikTok, sharing videos of her campaign events in different Venezuelan towns and cities.

Consumption behavior around information regarding the current electoral process and news on politics also indicates the important role of digital platforms and messaging apps in the country's information ecosystem.

To understand how Venezuelans obtain information about elections, the Venezuelan Electoral Observatory interviewed 2,734 people in all states between August 1–8, 2023. Social media platforms were the information channel placed first by 46 percent of the interviewees. Forty percent of interviewees selected WhatsApp as one of their three main sources about electoral information, the same percentage that selected television channels. However, the research was not conclusive about which specific platforms were the most used, as interviewees sometimes mentioned Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube as examples. The interviewees also selected multiple sources in their responses.<sup>76</sup>

A survey of 1,200 Venezuelans registered in the National Electoral Registry in all states, conducted by More Consulting between April 1–3, 2024, showed that the population accessed news about politics mostly through Instagram (26.3 percent), TikTok (10.2 percent), news websites (9.9 percent), Facebook (6.1 percent), YouTube (5.9 percent), and WhatsApp (4.8 percent). When grouping the different sources of information, digital media were the largest source of information, with 70.8 percent, while 23.3 percent of respondents received information from traditional media. The study also categorized the political positions of respondents. Instagram was the main source of information on political news for each grouping, including 29.7 percent for “opposition,” 27.4 percent for “non-aligned,” and 16.5 percent for “officialists (or pro-government).”

## Social media as protest spaces

The Maduro regime's persecution of dissident and protesting voices online and offline has undermined the exercise of democratic freedoms, including the freedom of expression. Despite the risks, organizations and communities continue to

73 It is difficult to estimate the total audience of an information service on WhatsApp, given that subscribers can share content with dozens of other users in their groups. WhatsApp does not offer statistics for estimating circulation and amplification.

74 Interview with independent journalist Luis Carlos Diaz, April 29, 2022.

75 “National Opinion Study, Monitoring Venezuela.”

76 “Consumo de Información Electoral en Venezuela [Consumption of Electoral Information in Venezuela],” *Revista Comunicación* 205, 2024, 100–102, <https://comunicacion.gumilla.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Revista-de-Comunicacion-205.pdf>.

hold street demonstrations to protest the lack of essential public services, to demand fair wages for public workers, and to call for re-democratization. Although there have been fewer recent demonstrations than in 2017 (9,787 protests) or 2019 (16,739), the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict reported 6,956 protests in 2023.<sup>77</sup>

According to interviewees linked to labor unions and social movements, Venezuelan activists use social media to connect communities across regions of the country and to promote street demonstrations demanding economic rights.<sup>32</sup> These mobilization efforts enabled by social media are considered paramount spaces for increasing participation and fostering the development of digital competencies in parallel. The heads of citizen-journalism network Reporte Ya, Patricia Rodriguez and Patricia Spadaro, say that human rights defenders, local leaders, and heads of CSOs are becoming the agents of social cohesion in place of the institutional political representation that the Maduro regime controls or has dismantled. Both journalists pointed out that street mobilization is led by organizations such as Red Sindical de Venezuela, Monitor Salud, teachers, iron- and steel-industry workers, oil-industry workers, and retired public-administration workers. According to Rodriguez and Spadaro, these groups connect their street protests with the digital space, building on the training Reporte Ya and others have been providing since 2010. Probox, an observatory that monitors social media conversation in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, indicates that citizens without a political affiliation, especially educators and retired workers, are the main actors pushing anti-regime protest hashtags on X.

## Violations of citizens' rights in Venezuela's digital environment

A 2023 report by the OAS Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights registered that Venezuelan journalism occurs amid “stigmatization, harassment, and threats, as well as fear of criminalization for the exercise of their work.” The special rapporteur’s office showed its concern about “differentiated attacks based on gender” against women journalists, activists, and indigenous people.

In the following subsections, the DFRLab reports on how the regime vulnerates Venezuelans’ rights in the digital environment. This covers lawfare and persecution of legitimate speech, cyber harassment, and curtailment of online speech.

## Lawfare and persecution of legitimate speech

Maduro’s rule has been perpetuated through surveillance, harassment, and arbitrary imprisonment. According to Espacio Público, between January 2018 and April 2023, violations of freedom of expression against journalists and human rights defenders resulted in seven killings, 158 judicial harassment cases, and 756 cases of censorship. IPYS Venezuela reported three killings, 118 arbitrary detentions, and seven forced disappearances between 2019 and 2022.

Democratic rights organization Freedom House’s “Freedom on the Net 2023” report stated that “the Maduro government has tightened its grip on online speech through a series of restrictive laws establishing criminal penalties for online activities.”<sup>78</sup> Some of the laws that Maduro has used to intimidate and prosecute Venezuelans for online speech are the Law against Hate and the RESORTE-ME law. These laws’ seemingly benign names disguise their malicious applications.

In January 2016, Maduro decreed a state of exception for reasons of economic emergency, which allowed the office of the presidency to assume functions of the National Assembly, such as approving the national budget, allocating National Treasury funds for expenses not foreseen in the budget, creating or eliminating taxes, authorizing new external public debt, and eliminating comptroller procedures in public procurement, among other provisions affecting the country’s economic life. The Constitution of Venezuela establishes that an economic emergency—one of the possible justifications for a state of exception decree—can be declared with the authorization of the National Assembly for a maximum of sixty days. The National Assembly did not approve this state of exception, but Maduro nevertheless imposed its mandates for more than four years.<sup>79</sup>

77 “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2019”; “Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2023.”

78 “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net—Country Report 2023,” Freedom House, October 3, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2023>.

79 “Estados de Excepción y de Emergencia Económica [States of Exception and Economic Emergency],” Transparencia Venezuela, last visited November 15, 2023, <https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/04-Estados-de-excepcion-Y-DE-EMERGENCIA-ECONOMICA.pdf>.



The RESORTE-ME Law (initially passed in 2004 and amended in 2010) is infamous for an article prohibiting broadcast and electronic (i.e., internet-based) media from publishing information “aimed at promoting distress among citizens” (Article 5). This law also prohibits the publication of news that is not truthful, but the application of this law is typically discretionary. In practice, news that refers to corruption, human rights violations, and failures in the provision of public services has been considered untrue. Similarly, the regime has deemed coverage of social protests and pro-democratization political mobilizations as “promoting distress,” a deliberately vague wording that allows for sweeping application of the law to quash freedom of the press. The article’s wording was copied in gag legislation enacted in other Latin American countries influenced by Chavismo.

Meanwhile, CSOs have widely criticized the Law against Hate, enacted in November 2017, for strengthening the Maduro regime’s ability to further erode freedom in Venezuela. Human rights organizations have criticized the Law against Hate for its chilling effect, as the Maduro regime has used it to jail and persecute journalists and dissidents. The law penalizes war propaganda and hate speech, including that which is “political or of any other nature,” an all-encompassing scope that allows for abuse. This law establishes penalties of up to twenty years in prison for “expressing hatred through electronic means,” which includes social media posts. It also requires social media platforms and electronic media to immediately remove content that may be considered within the scope of penalization. If the content is not removed within six hours of publication, the entity responsible for it can be fined and web portals can be blocked.

Reporting on Espacio Público’s research, Spanish press agency EFE highlighted how the Venezuelan organization had identified eighty-three cases of this law being used to persecute legitimate

speech between 2017 and June 18, 2023.<sup>80</sup> Espacio Público explained that most of the victims have been public workers, journalists, and members of nongovernmental organizations, who were subject to “detentions, raids, arbitrary legal proceedings, physical assaults, harassment, dismissals by public institutions, among other actions.”

The Organic Law on Telecommunications generally protects the privacy of communications, including a mandate that telecommunications-interception requests can only be undertaken after prosecutors obtain court approval in pursuit of a criminal investigation.<sup>81</sup> However, phone records are available to prosecutors without a judicial order and the Criminal Processing Code mandates telecom and financial institutions be available 24/7 to “process and provide the location registry of citizens.” Additionally, Venezuela still lacks a personal-data protection law.

Transparency Venezuela’s assessment of the 2021 Law of Transparency and Access to Public Interest Information is that, far from guaranteeing that right, it further consolidated secrecy.<sup>82</sup> This flawed legislation favors impunity and lack of accountability for acts of corruption. Likewise, it contributes to the violation of political and civil rights associated with access to information and participation in public affairs.

During the current election period, the Maduro-controlled National Assembly has pushed for the approval of other laws that have been under discussion for years and would further restrict freedom of expression, grant additional legal authorities, and impose criminal sanctions against political opponents, journalists, media, activists, and CSOs financed through international cooperation funds.

On April 2, 2024, Maduro’s vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, formally presented to the assembly the bill Law against Fascism, Neo-Fascism and Similar

80 “Espacio Público Documenta 217 Violaciones a la Libertad de Expresión en Primer Semestre [Espacio Público Documents 217 Violations of Freedom of Expression in First Half of the Year],” Runrun.es, July 7, 2023, <https://runrun.es/noticias/504773/espacio-publico-documenta-217-violaciones-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-en-primer-semester/>.

81 “Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones [Organic Law on Telecommunications],” Organization of American States, March 28, 2000, [https://www.oas.org/juridico/spanish/cyb\\_ven\\_ley\\_telecomunicaciones.pdf](https://www.oas.org/juridico/spanish/cyb_ven_ley_telecomunicaciones.pdf).

82 “Ley de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información de Interés Público,” Asamblea Nacional, last visited November 15, 2023, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/leyes/sancionadas/ley-de-transparencia-y-acceso-a-la-informacion-de-interes-publico>; “La Ley de Transparencia Aprobada por la Asamblea Nacional Consolida el Secretismo [Transparency Law Approved by the National Assembly Consolidates Secrecy],” Transparency Venezuela, September 17, 2021, <https://transparenciave.org/la-ley-de-transparencia-aprobada-por-la-asamblea-nacional-consolida-el-secretismo/>.

Expressions.<sup>83</sup> Rodríguez explained that this law complements the scope of other laws previously approved, such as the Law against Hate.<sup>84</sup> International and Venezuelan organizations have rejected the regime’s legislative action. The OAS described the law as “fascist.”<sup>85</sup> IPYS Venezuela noted the inaccuracies in the terminology of the law, such as the “vague definitions” of the words “fascism” and “neo-fascism,” and commented that this “opens spaces for its discretionary and eventually arbitrary application.” IPYS Venezuela also raised concerns that the law would create the “imposition of criminal and administrative sanctions for disseminating “prohibited messages.”<sup>86</sup>

If passed, the proposed Ley de Cooperación Internacional or Ley de Fiscalización, Regularización, Actuación y Financiamiento de las Organizaciones Sociales sin Fines de Lucro (International Cooperation Law or Law for the Control, Regularization, Activities and Financing of Nonprofit Social Organizations) may further undermine freedom of expression in Venezuela. The proposed law, which would target organizations that receive international cooperation funds, would restrict the funding of CSOs—namely nongovernmental organizations and independent media outlets—not aligned with Maduro, and would strengthen the regime’s control. On April 4, 2024, the Maduro-controlled National Assembly announced the approval in the first read of this law. At the time of writing, it is being discussed in a second round before its approval.<sup>87</sup> The regime has drafted several other similar regulations since 2006, though none has been enacted. The first significant legislative effort to this effect was the

Bill for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination, proposed in 2010. It prohibited nongovernmental organizations from receiving international assistance if they worked on defending political rights or monitoring the performance of public agencies. Although the bill was never enacted in Venezuela, analogous laws were enacted in Ecuador and Bolivia in 2013. Russia passed a similar law in 2012, and that Russian “foreign agents” law was the model for the Nicaraguan law passed in 2021. At the time of writing, Georgia has passed a similar law, sparking intense citizen protests.

## Violations of online freedom of speech and online harassment

Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela, the two main nongovernmental organizations focused on freedom of speech and the right to information in Venezuela, publish comprehensive annual reports on violations of freedom of expression in the country.<sup>88</sup> In 2023, the last year analyzed, both organizations recorded a slight decrease in the number of violations. The observed decline in incidents should not be misconstrued as a positive development, as instances of aggression and their resultant victims are still annually recorded by the hundreds, and the decline could speak to a populace that is more cautious (i.e., self-censoring) about criticizing the regime.

At the time of this report, authorities, sympathizers, and security personnel aligned with the Maduro regime continue to employ various forms of violence and repression. These actions indiscriminately

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- 83 Read the draft of the law at the bottom of this article: Luisa Quintero, “¿Qué Contempla el Proyecto de Ley contra el Fascismo, la Nueva Amenaza de Maduro? [What Does the Bill against Fascism, Maduro’s New Threat, Contemplate?],” *Tal Cual*, April 4, 2024, <https://talcualdigital.com/que-contempla-el-proyecto-de-ley-contra-el-fascismo-la-nueva-amenaza-de-maduro/>.
- 84 Carolina Alcalde, “Parlamento Venezolano Avanza Proyecto de Ley contra el Fascismo que Prohíbe Mensajes de Violencia como Método de Acción Política [Venezuelan Parliament Advances Bill against Fascism that Prohibits Messages of Violence as a Method of Political Action],” *Voz de América*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/venezuela-ley-contra-el-fascismo-7553991.html>.
- 85 “Statement from the OAS General Secretariat on the So-Called ‘Law for the Defense of Essequibo’ Approved by the Venezuelan Regime,” Organization of American States, April 8, 2024, [https://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-021/24](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-021/24).
- 86 “Alerta IPYSve: Proyecto de Ley contra el Fascismo Restringe Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión [IPYSve Alert: Anti-Fascism Bill Restricts Right to Freedom of Expression],” IPYS Venezuela, April 5, 2024, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/alerta-ipysve-proyecto-de-ley-contra-el-fascismo-restringe-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion/>.
- 87 Desiree Marbelys Rengifo González, “Comisión de Política Interior Culmina Informe para Segunda Discusión de Ley sobre ONG [Domestic Policy Committee Completes Report for Second Discussion of Law for NGO],” Asamblea Nacional, April 4, 2024, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/noticias/comision-de-politica-interior-culmina-informe-para-segunda-discusion-de-ley-sobre-ong>.
- 88 Their methodologies vary, so the number of cases reported is different, but the general patterns are similar. See the links below to know the last methodology used by Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela: Carlos Correa, et al., “Informe 2023: Situación General del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión en Venezuela. Enero–Diciembre 2023 [Report 2023: General Situation of the Right to Freedom of Expression in Venezuela. January–December 2023],” Espacio Público, May 3, 2024, <https://espaciopublico.org/situacion-general-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-en-venezuela-enero/>; “Reporte Anual 2023 de IPYS Venezuela ‘En el Laberinto de la Censura’ [IPYS Venezuela Annual Report 2023: In the Labyrinth of Censorship],” IPYS Venezuela, March 3, 2024, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2024/03/03/reporte-anual-2023-de-ipys-venezuela-en-el-laberinto-de-la-censura/>.

**Table 1.** Violations of freedom of expression in Venezuela by year, as documented by Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela. The 2024 data correspond to the period from January to April.

Year	Espacio Público	IPYS Venezuela
	Cases	Cases
2012	169	200
2013	220	285
2014	350	340
2015	237	391
2016	266	331
2017	708	518
2018	387	266
2019	468	534
2020	390	374
2021	244	249
2022	227	257
2023	204	233
2024	68	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,938</b>	<b>3,978</b>

Source: Table elaborated by DFRLab using annual reports by Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela: “Informes Anuales [Annual Reports],” Espacio Público, last visited May 15, 2024, [https://espaciopublico.org/category/informes\\_anuales/](https://espaciopublico.org/category/informes_anuales/); “Reportes [Reports],” IPYS Venezuela, last visited May 15, 2024, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/categoria/investigaciones/reportes/>.

target both opposition and civil society voices, undermining their capacity to freely exercise their fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech.<sup>89</sup>

Espacio Público’s latest report for 2024 registered sixty-eight cases, comprising 135 violations of freedom of expression occurring between January and April. Espacio Público highlighted that this figure

represented a 22-percent increase from the same period in 2023, when it recorded fifty-five cases. Moreover, Espacio Público found that around thirty cases occurred online, accounting for 44 percent of the total.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, the OAS Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights recorded 128 aggressions against journalists, activists, and other members of civil society between January and April 2024. The rapporteur also registered eighteen detentions of people who exercised their freedom of expression. The OAS’s office warned about “the deterioration of civic space” and the increase in repressive acts in Venezuela.<sup>91</sup>

Orchestrated actions by the Maduro regime, primarily executed at an institutional level, largely influenced the data fluctuation from 2022 to 2023. A prominent example is the mass closure of radio stations by CONATEL in 2022, which expanded during the 2023 electoral period to include widespread intimidation, censorship, verbal aggression, and stigmatizing campaigns, all of which were led by Maduro’s officials and sympathizers.

Extreme violence against media workers characterized 2022, with crimes such as aggression, forced disappearance, and attacks. José Gregorio Urbina, the director of Frontera 92.5 FM in Apure state, was assassinated after receiving threats for his reporting on the Bolivarian National Guard and armed groups near the Colombian border. Urbina’s killing was the last one registered, and the perpetrators remain unknown. His unsolved murder underscores the persistent impunity hindering justice and leading to self-censorship, as only four out of sixteen murders documented by Espacio Público since 2002 have been resolved.<sup>92</sup>

Regarding the main perpetrators, in 2023, Espacio Público identified eighty-six violations by state institutions, fifty-two by public workers, and fifty-one by state security forces.<sup>93</sup> IPYS Venezuela attributed forty-seven attacks against freedom of expression

89 “Statement by Marta Valiñas, Chair of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, at the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council,” United Nations Human Rights Council, March 20, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/03/statement-marta-valinas-chair-independent-international-fact>.

90 “Situación General del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión e Información, Enero–Abril 2024 [Situation of the Right to Freedom of Expression and Information in Venezuela January–April 2024],” Espacio Público, May 3, 2024, <https://espaciopublico.org/situacion-general-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-e-informacion-enero-abril-2024/>.

91 “The SRFOE Expresses Concern over Repression against Journalists and Deterioration of Civic Space in Venezuela,” Organization of American States, May 16, 2024, [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm?File=/en/iachr/expression/media\\_center/preleases/2024/106.asp](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm?File=/en/iachr/expression/media_center/preleases/2024/106.asp).

92 “Sigue la Impunidad en Crímenes contra Periodistas en Venezuela [Impunity Continues in Crimes against Journalists in Venezuela],” Espacio Público, November 1, 2023, <https://espaciopublico.org/sigue-la-impunidad-en-crimenes-contra-periodistas-en-venezuela/>.

93 “Situación General del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión en Venezuela Enero–Diciembre 2023.”

**Tables 2-3.** Tables showing categories for violations of freedom of expression in Venezuela, as delineated by IPYS Venezuela and Espacio Público.

Categories for violations of freedom of expression in 2022	
Espacio Público	
Category	Violations
Censorship	199
Administrative restriction	91
Intimidation	83
Verbal harassment	44
Threat	23
Judiciary harassment	22
Aggression	3
Attack	2
Killing	1

IPYS Venezuela	
Category	Violations
Administrative restrictions	130
Stigmatizing speech	62
Physical aggression and attacks	55
Restrictions on access to public information	43
Judiciary harassment	29
Internet restrictions	27
Censorship	21
Arbitrary detention	2
Gender violence alert	2
Enforced disappearance	1
Killing	1

Categories for violations of freedom of expression in 2023	
Espacio Público	
Category	Violations
Intimidation	121
Censorship	99
Verbal harassment	48
Threat	38
Administrative restriction	31
Judiciary harassment	30
Aggression	16
Attack	1

IPYS Venezuela	
Category	Violations
Physical and verbal aggression	95
Stigmatizing speech	72
Internet restrictions	58
Restrictions on access to public information	43
Censorship	33
Administrative restrictions	30
Judiciary harassment	15
Gender violence alert	3

Source: DFRLab-generated table using IPYS Venezuela and Espacio Público 2022 and 2023 reports on freedom of expression. Both IPYS and Espacio Público recorded the type of violation by the number of complaints or violations that were recorded for each case. Therefore, the tables of the types and perpetrators of violations have higher numbers than the table “Violations of Freedom of Expression in Venezuela.” Correa, et al., “Informe 2022”; “Periodismo bajo las Sombras: Reporte Anual 2022 IPYSve [Journalism under the Shadows: Annual Report 2022],” IPYS Venezuela, March 5, 2023, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2023/03/05/periodismo-bajo-las-sombras/>; Correa et al., “Informe 2023”; “Reporte Anual 2023.”

**Tables 4-5.** Tables showing the perpetrators of violations of freedom of expression in Venezuela by volume.

Perpetrators of violations of freedom of expression in 2022	
Espacio Público	
Perpetrator	Cases
State institutions	127
Public workers	43
State security forces	41
Unknown	13
Cyber attackers	11
Private organization	11
Private individual	3
Organized crime	1
Media outlet	1
Media director	1

IPYS Venezuela	
Perpetrator	Cases
CONATEL	111
State security forces	36
Government sympathizers	24
Unknown	17
Mayor's offices and their agencies	14

Perpetrators of violations of freedom of expression in 2023	
Espacio Público	
Perpetrator	Cases
State institutions	86
Public workers	52
State security forces	51
Unknown	15
Cyber attackers	8
Private organization	8
Private individual	7
Media director	5
Organized crime	5
Government sympathizers	4
Media outlet	2

IPYS Venezuela	
Perpetrator	Cases
Unknown	47
State security forces	30
CONATEL	19
Governor's offices and their agencies	18
Organized crime	18
Media director	18
Government sympathizers	18
Ministry's offices and their agencies	17
Mayor's offices and their agencies	12
National legislature offices	10
Influential public figures	9
Citizens	9
Opposition sympathizers	8
Public Ministry	7
Public Prosecutor's Office	7
Security officials of public institutions	4
Websites	4
Presidency of the Republic	3
National Electoral Council	3
Official political party	3
Internet platforms	3
Municipal councils	2
Regional legislature offices	2
Private security	2
Internet providers	2

Source: DFRLab-generated table using IPYS Venezuela and Espacio Público's 2022 and 2023 reports on freedom of expression: Correa, et al., "Informe 2022"; "Periodismo bajo las Sombras"; Correa et al., "Informe 2023"; "Reporte Anual 2023."

**Table 6.** Table showing violations of freedom of expression against journalists in Venezuela by gender, as surveyed by IPYS Venezuela.

Violations of freedom of expression by gender		
IPYS Venezuela		
Year	Women	Men
2019	113	340
2020	130	195
2021	95	127
2022	53	89
2023	90	125
<b>Total</b>	<b>481</b>	<b>876</b>

Source: DFRLab collected data for this table using IPYS Venezuela annual reports on attacks against journalist from 2019 to 2022.

to unknown actors, thirty to security forces, and nineteen to CONATEL.

CONATEL remains one of the primary actors in violations against freedom of expression in the last two years. IPYS Venezuela attributed 130 cases of attacks against freedom of expression to CONATEL in that period, including orders that led to the closure of 122 radio stations.<sup>94</sup>

In 2023, IPYS Venezuela reported that 125 men and ninety women were affected by restrictions and attacks on freedom of expression, while in 2022 the numbers of men and women were eighty-nine and fifty-three, respectively.<sup>95</sup>

IPYS Venezuela also conducted a survey of journalists that collected the largest number of violations of freedom of expression using gender-based violence. The survey of more than five hundred Venezuelan press workers concluded that

19.9 percent were victims of gender-based violence, of whom 71.7 percent were women and 28.3 were men. IPYS Venezuela’s report is limited to violations that occurred in 2021.<sup>96</sup>

Also, CEPAZ—a nongovernmental organization that promotes and defends democracy, human rights, and peace in Venezuela—has reported patterns of persecution and criminalization by the Maduro regime since 2014. CEPAZ documented 523 cases of “persecution and criminalization” perpetrated mostly by security forces and institutions in 2022.<sup>97</sup> Between January and July 2023, CEPAZ documented 389 cases attributed mostly to “Nicolas Maduro’s government policy to keep the power.”<sup>98</sup>

### Attacks against female politicians

In its September 2023 report, the UN-FFMV highlighted “a prevalent gendered dimension in the attacks and harassment within the political domain.”<sup>99</sup> The UN-FFMV pointed out that prominent Venezuelan women in politics endure derogatory gender-based remarks about their appearance, intelligence, and capabilities. For example, the DFRLab observed such attacks against three women running in the opposition primaries: María Corina Machado, Delsa Solórzano, and Tamara Adrián.

Politicians of Maduro-controlled institutions and members of PSUV have been behind attacks against pro-democratization leader Machado. For instance, Jorge Rodríguez, president of the Maduro-controlled National Assembly, called for people to go to the streets against Machado for her support of sanctions against the Maduro regime imposed by different countries. Rodríguez’s attacks appeared alongside those of other Maduro regime allies during the parliamentary session of July 5, 2023, and continued the following weeks with street blockades and sabotages against Machado

94 “Reporte Anual 2023 de IPYS Venezuela ‘En el Laberinto de la Censura’ [IPYS Venezuela Annual Report 2023 ‘In the Labyrinth of Censorship’],” IPYS Venezuela, March 3, 2024, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2024/03/03/reporte-anual-2023-de-ipys-venezuela-en-el-laberinto-de-la-censura/>.

95 “Periodismo bajo las Sombras.”

96 “La Orquestación del Silencio [The Orchestration of Silence],” IPYS Venezuela, April 20, 2022, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Orquestacion-Del-Silencio-1.pdf>.

97 “Monitoreo de Persecución y Criminalización en Venezuela 2022 [Monitoring of Persecution and Criminalization in Venezuela 2022],” CEPAZ, May 24, 2023, <https://cepaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Informe-final-persecucion-2022.pdf>.

98 “Monitoreo de Persecución y Criminalización en Venezuela—Julio 2023 [Monitoring of Persecution and Criminalization in Venezuela—July 2023],” CEPAZ, September 1, 2023, <https://cepaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Informe-persecucion-Julio-2023.pdf>; “Monitoreo de Persecución y Criminalización—Junio y Primer Semestre de 2023 [Monitoring of Persecution and Criminalization in Venezuela—June and First Semester 2023],” CEPAZ, August 15, 2023, <https://cepaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Informe-persecucion-Junio-2023.pdf>.

99 “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.”

**Table 7.** Table showing the number of recorded incidents, by type, during calendar years 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 of hate, discrimination, and other forms of abuse that can happen online, as recorded by IPYS Venezuela and Espacio Público.

Source	Category	Number of Incidents			
		2020	2021	2022	2023
IPYS Venezuela	Stigmatizing speech	N/A	68	62	72
	Attacks and aggressions	338	140	55	95
Espacio Público	Intimidation	356	161	83	121
	Verbal harassment	78	38	44	48
	Threats	93	34	23	38

Source: Venezuela Inteligente extracted the number of violations by category using data taken from IPYS Venezuela and Espacio Público annual reports.

rallies.<sup>100</sup> Online, social media accounts and dubious media outlets supporting Maduro have attacked Machado and Solórzano using manipulated and misleading claims that both candidates had made statements targeting each other.<sup>101</sup> Misogynistic attacks comprised 4.3 and 2.3 percent, respectively, of mentions of Solórzano and Machado on X during the primary campaign.

Meanwhile, Tamara Adrián, LGBTQ+ activist, former National Assembly deputy, and former presidential

candidate for the opposition primaries, was the subject of transphobic attacks, particularly on TikTok.<sup>102</sup> Adrián was labeled with homophobic and transphobic slurs, and her deadname was used to deny her identifying as a woman. Her defenders, meanwhile, emphasized her intelligence, academic preparation, courage, and political work on social inclusion. Almost 20 percent of Adrián’s social media mentions during the primary campaign included attacks on her gender identification.<sup>103</sup>

100 Deisy Martínez, “Jorge Rodríguez a Candidatos de Primarias: No Merecen Libertades que Ofrece la Constitución por ‘Pedir’ Sanciones [Jorge Rodríguez to Primary Candidates: They Do Not Deserve Freedoms Offered by the Constitution for ‘Asking for’ Sanctions],” Efecto Cocuyo, July 5, 2023, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/jorge-rodriguez-candidatos-primarias-libertades-constitucion-sanciones/>; “Ahora Llaman Violentos a Quienes Reclaman,” Dice Diosdado sobre María Corina [‘Now They Call Violent Those Who Complain,’ Says Diosdado about Maria Corina],” Efecto Cocuyo, July 16, 2023, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/diosdado-maria-corina-grupos-violentos/>.

101 “Engañoso: ¿Delsa Solórzano Sugirió el Retiro de María Corina Machado de las Primarias Opositoras? [Misleading: Delsa Solórzano Suggested the Withdrawal of María Corina Machado from the Opposition Primaries?],” Cazadores de Fake News, September 8, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/enganoso-delsa-solorzano-sugirio-el-retiro-de-maria-corina-machado-de-las-primarias-opositoras/>; “Falso: ¿María Corina Machado Admitió poca Convocatoria en Concentraciones de la Oposición? [False: Maria Corina Machado Admitted Low Turnout at Opposition Rallies?],” Cazadores de Fake News, August 31, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/falso-maria-corina-machado-admitio-poca-convocatoria-en-concentraciones-de-la-oposicion/>.

102 In 2015, Tamara Adrian, a lawyer and Voluntad Popular leader, became the first transgender woman elected to Venezuela’s National Assembly and the second transgender person elected to a parliament in the Americas.

103 “#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: Desinformación y Ataques en Línea con Tinte de Género [#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: Gender-Tinged Disinformation and Online Attacks],” Probox, December 12, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-desinformacion-y-ataques-en-linea-con-tinte-de-genero>.

## Targeting of independent voices in online spaces

Information operations linked to the Maduro regime targeting journalists, human rights defenders, and activists have common characteristics: coordinated weaponization of media and stigmatization. These operations sometimes escalate to police detention or judicial prosecution without due process.

As an example of the coordinated weaponization of online media, on January 6, 2021, the website Declassified UK published an article stating that the British government had funded independent media and nongovernmental organization projects in Venezuela. The piece portrayed the funding as part of a foreign influence operation to destabilize Venezuela. Propaganda outlet Misión Verdad and private media outlets owned by businesses friendly with the Maduro regime quickly picked up the same allegations, republishing them for their Venezuelan audiences. The relationship is recurrent: Venezuelan open-source investigators have documented routine coordination among Misión Verdad and English-language outlets Grayzone, Global Research, and Declassified UK.<sup>104</sup> In this case, pro-Maduro Twitter accounts amplified Declassified UK and Misión Verdad pieces claiming the British funding was aiming to destabilize Venezuela. Among those spreading the claims was Jorge Arreaza, Maduro's former minister of foreign affairs, who is close to the Misión Verdad editorial team. The attacks targeted journalists from Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, Caraota Digital, Radio Fe y Alegría, El Estímulo, the National Union of Press Workers (SNTP by its Spanish initials), and nongovernmental organization Transparency Venezuela. Some of the most vicious attacks targeted Luz Mely Reyes, director of the independent media outlet Efecto Cocuyo.

Another case involved the Bolivarian National Police Special Actions Force (FAES, by its Spanish initials). The UN-FFMV has documented that the FAES carried out nearly four thousand extrajudicial killings from its creation in April 2016 to 2019.<sup>105</sup> Reports by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and PROVEA indicated that between 2016 and May 2019, Venezuelan security forces carried out at least eighteen thousand extrajudicial killings, most of which can be attributed to the FAES.<sup>106</sup> In March 2021, digital outlet El Pitazo published a story involving an FAES agent, after which dozens of Twitter accounts immediately responded by claiming that the news was false and accusing the outlet of defamation. Three days later, human rights organization PROVEA published an unrelated investigation about extrajudicial killings in 2020, including hundreds of documented FAES victims. The same accounts that previously responded to El Pitazo started attacking PROVEA, applauding the FAES for clearing the neighborhoods of gangs and accusing human rights organizations of defending criminals.<sup>107</sup> Under pressure from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the FAES was officially dissolved in July 2022. In March 2023, the UN-FFMV reported that the same operations continued to be carried out under a new name, the Directorate of Strategic and Tactical Actions (DAET, by its Spanish initials).

High-ranking state officials have repeatedly used their accounts on social media and airtime in mainstream media to stigmatize and defame media and nongovernmental organizations over several years, targeting the same groups. This applies particularly to Diosdado Cabello, the regime's second-in-command, via his "Con el Mazo Dando"

104 Jeanfreddy Gutiérrez, "Portals of Lies: The International Swarm of 'Independent Media' at the Service of Chavista Narratives," ProBox, Mar 24, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/en-US/publicacion/portales-de-la-mentira-como-es-el-enjambre-internacional-de-medios-independientes-al-servicio-de-las-narrativas-chavistas>.

105 "Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela."

106 "Venezuela: Extrajudicial Killings in Poor Areas," Human Rights Watch, September 18, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/18/venezuela-extrajudicial-killings-poor-areas>.

107 "Los Trolls que Defienden a las FAES en Twitter [Trolls Defending FAES on Twitter]," Cazadores de Fake News, March 10, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/trolls-defienden-faes/>.



broadcast (as mentioned previously) on state television network VTV.<sup>108</sup> In regular segments on the show, Cabello attacks media outlets and CSOs.

Beyond that, Cazadores de Fake News documented nine different coordinated defamation campaigns against journalists developed using social media, troll accounts, and fringe websites.<sup>109</sup> These campaigns targeted journalists Roberto Deniz, Luis Carlos Díaz, Sebastiana Bárraez, and Carla Angola, among others.

## The Roland Carreño case

The case of Roland Carreño exemplifies how judicialization—the co-option of a judicial system to suppress electoral participation and target political opponents—and information operations are blended into political persecution in Venezuela, with total disregard for constitutional rights. A journalist and Voluntad Popular party operations coordinator, Carreño was arbitrarily arrested when returning to his apartment building in Caracas on October 26, 2020. According to his neighbors, plainclothes men in black cars without plates intercepted and detained Carreño and two companions. After going missing for more than twenty-four hours, stories surfaced on social media that Carreño and his two companions, Elías Rodríguez and Yeferson Sarcos, had been detained by the Bolivarian National Police at a police station in Caracas.

The day after the arbitrary detention and disappearance, fringe websites published that Carreño had been detained for performing sexual acts inside a car in public sight.<sup>110</sup> After twenty-four hours, contradicting the websites' claims, the attorney general tweeted that Carreño had

been detained for participating in a conspiracy against democratic peace.<sup>111</sup> In a subsequent press conference, Attorney General Tarek William Saab declared that Carreño would be indicted for “conspiracy, trafficking weapons of war, and financing terrorism.” Saab indicated that Carreño had recorded a video confessing responsibility for those crimes.<sup>112</sup>

During a nationally broadcast press conference a few days later, on October 30, Jorge Rodríguez, a prominent ruling party member, announced a video, saying that Carreño was confessing to conspiracy and terrorism charges. In the video, recorded while Carreño was held in prison, the detainee explained his mundane functions as a Voluntad Popular operations coordinator. Still, the video did not include any confession of the crimes listed in the indictment, nor did Carreño confess any responsibility for any conspiracy or terrorist activity. Also, according to Venezuelan legislation, the acceptance of a criminal charge is only valid when the detainee makes the statement in the presence of his defense attorney and a prosecutor from the Prosecutor’s Office; in this video, Carreño appears alone, speaking to a camera.

Rodríguez also showed screenshots supposedly from WhatsApp conversations Carreño allegedly had with other members of Voluntad Popular, with Juan Guaidó, then interim president of Venezuela, and with a person presented as Carreño’s partner. During the broadcast, Rodríguez repeatedly referred to Carreño, who is openly homosexual, as a “rat” and made constant derogatory homophobic remarks. Indeed, Rodríguez even recommended that the Prosecutor’s Office look into a supposed male prostitution ring, given the pictures in Carreño’s supposed chats.<sup>113</sup>

108 The name of Diosdado’s show is a play on his name. “Diosdado” roughly translates to “given by God.” The phrase “a dios rogando y con el mazo dando” (“to God begging and with the mallet hitting”) uses the same word as giving, equivalent to “God helps those that help themselves.” The show uses a club as its logo and frequently features a large club as a prop.

109 “#PeriodistasDifamados: Campañas Coordinadas de Desinformación, Difamación y Hostigamiento Digital contra Comunicadores Venezolanos, 2020–2021 [Defamed Journalists: Coordinated Campaigns of Disinformation, Defamation and Online Harassment against Venezuelan Communicators, 2020–2021],” Cazadores de Fake News, December 2, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/periodistasdifamados-informe-spa/>.

110 Ana Carolina Arias, “Roland Carreño no fue detenido por la PNB por ‘actos indecentes’ (Roland Carreño Was Not Arrested by the PNB for ‘Indecent Acts’),” Observatorio Venezolano de Fake News, October 30, 2020, <https://fakenews.cotejo.info/noti-fake/roland-carreno-no-fue-detenido-por-la-pnb-por-actos-indecenes/>.

111 Tarek William Saab (@TarekWilliamSaab), “1) #AHORA el @MinpublicoVE ante la detención en #flagrancia de Ronald Carreño -por su participación en planes conspirativos contra la paz democrática - designó al Fiscal 73 Nac,” Twitter thread, October 27, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TarekWilliamSaab/status/1321271741117849600>.

112 Luigino Bracci Roa, “Fiscal General sobre Roland Carreño y las razones de su detención, 29 Octubre 2020 (Attorney General on Roland Carreño and the Reasons for his Arrest, October 29, 2020),” *Situación en Venezuela* series on YouTube (archived version of the video post), October 29, 2020, <https://archive.ph/gLEss>.

113 Luigino Bracci Roa, “Jorge Rodríguez muestra confesión de Roland Carreño por uso de dinero de Citgo para Voluntad Popular (Jorge Rodríguez Shows Roland Carreño’s Confession for Use of Citgo Money for Voluntad Popular),” *Situación en Venezuela* series on YouTube (archived version of the video post), October 30, 2020, <https://archive.is/E3WkC>.

Immediately after Rodríguez's press conference ended, pro-regime websites and official accounts on social media pushed images allegedly pulled from Carreño's phone to make them go viral. Those screenshots had clearly been doctored, however, with different fonts used in the same conversation, long lists with names and dollar amounts, and people supposedly taking part in the conversation unnecessarily, exchanging pictures of themselves. The screenshots allegedly from conversations between Carreño and his male lover also showed several suspicious details, such as his supposed lover repeatedly misspelling his first name, referring to him as "Ronald" instead of "Roland." None of Rodríguez's screencaps have been verified or corroborated.

The shifting and inconsistent allegations regarding the reason for Carreño's detention, as reported by fringe websites, Rodríguez, and Saab in their media appearances, as well as what was actually stated in the indictment, all indicate that there was no real probable cause and likely points toward a politically motivated imprisonment.

On November 7, 2020, newly created Twitter account @laregleta1 posted twenty tweets with private pics purportedly extracted from Carreño's phone when he was incarcerated. The tweets included unrelated veiled threats against several Voluntad Popular members, as well as against other journalists and human rights defenders. The account's profile picture featured two power strips, and its description read "Current 220." These details seemed to hint at electric shocks commonly applied<sup>114</sup> to Venezuelan political prisoners' genitals and nipples.<sup>115</sup>

Carreño was released from prison on October 18, 2023, a week before he reached three years in jail. Carreño was the first of six prisoners released after the United States issued three general licenses temporarily authorizing transactions involving oil, gas, and gold, as well as Venezuelan sovereign bonds and Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA) debt bonds.<sup>116</sup> The trial against Carreño will continue.<sup>117</sup> Carreño cannot publicly discuss the details of his case. He made a brief statement the night of his release: "That my freedom comes at this hour fills me with great hope that the freedom of Venezuela will also come."<sup>118</sup> Since then, he has not spoken publicly. In Venezuela, it is common to issue gag orders on judicial processes for political reasons.

## The Javier Tarazona case

On April 26, 2021, the Venezuelan Ministry of Defense issued a statement revealing that "bloody combats with Colombian armed irregular groups" had happened in unpopulated areas near the town of La Victoria in Apure, a southern Venezuelan state bordering Colombia. Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López proclaimed that the Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana (FANB, or National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela) had destroyed an irregular group's camp.<sup>119</sup> The statement acknowledged casualties from the Venezuelan army side, but made no reference to Venezuelan prisoners taken by the irregular army.

FundaRedes, a nongovernmental organization specializing in monitoring armed violence in border areas of Venezuela, took as a priority the investigation and reporting of the incident in Apure. On April 27, FundaRedes Director Javier Tarazona posted a video to Twitter in which corpses of uniformed men can be seen being removed from

114 "Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: Crimes Against Humanity Committed through the State's Intelligence Services," United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/51/CRP.3, September 20, 2022.

115 "Te tenemos todo el @rolandcarreno contó como se roban el dinero de citgo Devuelve ese plata choro," Twitter, November 8, 2020. Supporting link deliberately not included to avoid further spread of hacked or private photos.

116 Antony J. Blinken, "Signing of Electoral Roadmap Between the Unitary Platform and Representatives of Maduro," US Department of State, October 18, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/signing-of-electoral-roadmap-between-the-unitary-platform-and-representatives-of-maduro/>.

117 "Alerta IPYSve | Roland Carreño estuvo casi tres años injustamente detenido (IPYSve Alert: Roland Carreño Was Unjustly Detained for Almost Three Years)," IPYS Venezuela, October 21, 2023, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/alerta-ipysve-roland-carreno-estuvo-casi-tres-anos-injustamente-detenido/>.

118 Osmary Hernández, "Roland Carreño tras su liberación: 'Me llena de mucha esperanza que también llegue la libertad de Venezuela' [Roland Carreño After His Release: 'It Fills Me with Great Hope That Venezuela's Freedom Will Also Come.]," CNN, October 19, 2023, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/video/liberacion-roland-carreno-juan-requesens-venezuela-cafe-tv>.

119 "Comunicado Oficial de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana (Official Communiqué of the Bolivarian National Armed Force)," Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Defensa, April 26, 2021, <http://www.mindefensa.gob.ve/mindefensa/2021/04/26/comunicado-oficial-de-la-fuerza-armada-nacional-bolivariana-17/>.

ditches and loaded onto a truck.<sup>120</sup> According to FundaRedes, an unnamed Catholic organization received the location of the corpses, and some of its members rescued the bodies and took them to the Guasdalito morgue.<sup>121</sup>

An anonymous audio recording attributed to a Venezuelan soldier indicated that the Venezuelan military received the wrong coordinates from their superiors and were ambushed by FARC dissidents of the Tenth Front (Disidencias de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/ Dissidents of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), who were killed or taken prisoner.<sup>122</sup> In a statement released on May 10, 2021, the Tenth Front announced that it had captured eight members of the Venezuelan army as prisoners of war on April 23.<sup>123</sup> On May 24, 2021, FundaRedes reported that Venezuelan soldiers were sent into that combat without sufficient weapons, food, and necessary first aid supplies. The report also blamed high-ranking Venezuelan officials for hiding the number of people killed and injured due to the clashes.<sup>124</sup> Likewise, no official information was given on the displacement of the civilian population forced to seek refuge on the Colombian side of the border amid the combat.

After these events, FundaRedes claimed that police forces and other unidentified individuals followed and harassed Tarazona. FundaRedes subsequently reported the threats and harassment against Tarazona and members of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The IACHR

granted precautionary measures to Tarazona, but the Venezuelan state did not respect the measures.<sup>125</sup>

On July 2, 2021, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) detained Tarazona in the city of Coro, Falcón state.<sup>126</sup> SEBIN also detained his brother Rafael as well as Omar García, both activists from FundaRedes, as well as Jhonny Romero, director of the National Committee of Family Victims of Forced Disappearances on the Venezuelan Coasts (Mayday Confavidf) at the same time. The group was in Falcón for work related to the documentation of activities of human-trafficking groups in Venezuela's northwestern region. Romero was released after eight hours. The Third Control Terrorism Court charged the three FundaRedes activists with inciting hatred, treason, and terrorism and moved them to El Helicoide—the largest prison for political prisoners—in Caracas. In October 2021, Rafael Tarazona and García were released after being diagnosed with COVID-19 while in prison. They are pending trial and must report to the court every fifteen days.<sup>127</sup> Javier Tarazona, meanwhile, is still incarcerated in El Helicoide, nearly three years later, without sentence; Tarazona is considered a prisoner of conscience, and his case has been repeatedly referenced in the United Nations Human Rights Council.<sup>128</sup>

120 Javier Tarazona (@javiertarazona), "Vídeo evidencia cuerpos de militares caídos en sector La Capilla en conflicto con las FARC, los mismos son rescatados por productores agropecuarios," Twitter video, April 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/javiertarazona/status/1387027018257256449>.

121 "#Boletín32 | Conflicto Armado en Apure: Facciones Guerrilleras y Estado Enfrentados por el Poder (#Newsletter32: Armed Conflict in Apure: Guerrilla Factions and the State Clashing for Power)," FundaRedes, May 24, 2021, <https://www.fundaredes.org/2021/05/24/boletin32-conflicto-armado-en-apure-facciones-guerrilleras-y-estado-enfrentados-por-el-poder/>.

122 ONG FundaREDES, "Boletín 32 Final Corto (Newsletter 32 Short Final)," YouTube video, May 21, 2021, <https://youtu.be/la4um5BVIQM?t=186%22%20h%20%20HYPERLINK%20%22https://youtu.be/la4um5BVIQM?t=186>.

123 For more on the statement of the FARC dissidents of the Tenth Front, see Javier Tarazona (@javiertarazona), "La Guerrilla FARC-EP reconoce que tiene militares 'prisioneros de guerra' hace pública la lista de 8 efectivos que estarían secuestrados por este grupo terrorista desde el 23 de abril en conflicto," Twitter photo, May 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/javiertarazona/status/1391794186559664130/photo/1>; and "Cruz Roja recibe mensaje de disidencia de las Farc sobre soldados venezolanos secuestrados (Red Cross Receives Message from FARC Dissidents about Kidnapped Venezuelan Soldiers)," RCN Radio and Agencia Efe, May 10, 2021, <https://www.rcnradio.com/internacional/cruz-roja-recibe-mensaje-de-disidencia-de-las-farc-sobre-soldados-venezolanos>.

124 "#Boletín32 | Conflicto Armado en Apure.

125 "CIDH otorga medidas cautelares a favor de José Javier Tarazona Sánchez y familia en Venezuela (IACHR Grants Precautionary Measures in favor of José Javier Tarazona Sánchez and His Family in Venezuela)," Organization of American States, July 1, 2020, <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2020/157.asp>.

126 "Sebin detiene al director de la ONG Fundaredes, Javier Tarazona y a miembros de su equipo (SEBIN Detains Fundaredes NGO Director Javier Tarazona and Members of His Team)," Espacio Público, July 2, 2021, <https://espaciopublico.org/sebin-detiene-al-director-de-la-ong-fundaredes-javier-tarazona-y-a-miembros-de-su-equipo/>.

127 "Cronología del caso de la ONG Fundaredes (Chronology of the Fundaredes NGO case)," Acceso a la Justicia, June 7, 2024, <https://accesoalajusticia.org/cronologia-del-caso-de-la-ong-fundaredes/>.

128 "Venezuela: Further information: Free Venezuelan Prisoner of Conscience," Amnesty International, December 20, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr53/5121/2021/en/>.

## The Nancy Herrera case

Venezuela faces a rise in organized crime with transnational connections, operating in the Guayana region in southern Venezuela, where the illegal extraction of minerals is widespread. In 2011, late President Hugo Chávez announced the creation of the Orinoco Mining Arc to allow the exploitation of minerals in formerly protected areas of the Canaima National Park and the Imataca Forest Reserve. The Orinoco Mining Arc has an extension larger than the total territory of a nation such as, for example, Bulgaria, Cuba, or South Korea. This area is among the most biodiverse regions in the world and is also rich in gold, copper, diamonds, coltan, and rare earth elements. Since 2016, criminal syndicates have increased their control of the Orinoco Mining Arc, where they act with the acquiescence of the Venezuelan Army and the National Guard.<sup>129</sup>

Environmental impacts, criminal activity, and human rights violations in the Orinoco Mining Arc receive little coverage in the media.<sup>130</sup> In general, coverage of environmental issues is severely restricted in Venezuela, and journalists have even been detained when trying to document ecocides.<sup>131</sup> Illegal mining operations are also affecting the Venezuelan Amazon, causing deforestation and contaminating rivers with mercury beyond the area of the Orinoco Mining Arc. A September 2022 report from the

Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, says: “State and non-State actors have committed human rights violations and crimes against the local population in the struggle for control over mining areas.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, media outlet *Infobae* reported that thirty-two indigenous leaders had been killed as of October 9, 2022.<sup>133</sup>

Among the most recent cases garnering attention on social media was the indigenous mobilization against the devastation caused by illegal mining in Yapacana National Park, located in Amazonas state.<sup>134</sup> On July 4, 2023, Nancy Herrera, leader of the Cubeo indigenous community in the Yapacana region, reported that she had been threatened by the military and the prosecutor’s office after she had raised concerns about their support for illegal mining that was affecting her community.<sup>135</sup> On July 21, the military occupied Herrera’s house and the homes of other indigenous people. Military officers from the Amazonas Comprehensive Defense Operational Zone carried out an operation under false pretenses, claiming they were destroying illegal mining machinery. In actuality, the army used the operation as an excuse to displace around four thousand indigenous people from the area.<sup>136</sup>

129 For more on Orinoco Mining Arc criminal activity by the Maduro regime’s security forces and illegal organizations, see “Venezuela: Violent Abuses in Illegal Gold Mines,” Human Rights Watch, February 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/04/venezuela-violent-abuses-illegal-gold-mines>; “Status of Human Rights in Venezuela for the 40<sup>th</sup> Session of the Universal Periodic Review,” European Centre for Law and Justice, January 2022, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=9547&file=EnglishTranslation>; and Douglas Farah, “The Maduro Regime’s Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America,” Atlantic Council, August 13, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-regimes-illicit-activities-a-threat-to-democracy-in-venezuela-and-security-in-latin-america/>.

130 See more at Project SOSOrinoco, <https://sosorinoco.org/en/reports/>.

131 For reports about the environmental journalism situation in Venezuela, see “Reporte Especial IPYSve | Las 7 restricciones principales en el periodismo ambiental (Special Report IPYSve | Top 7 Constraints in Environmental Journalism),” IPYS Venezuela, December 15, 2020, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2020/12/15/reporte-especial-ipysve-las-7-restricciones-principales-en-el-periodismo-ambiental/>; and “Venezuelan Authorities Detain, Charge Environmental Journalist Luis Alejandro Acosta,” Committee to Protect Journalists, September 14, 2023, <https://cpj.org/2023/09/venezuelan-authorities-detain-charge-environmental-journalist-luis-alejandro-acosta/>.

132 “Report of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/51/43, September 20, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/report-ffmv-september2022>.

133 Sebastiana Barráez, “El asesinato no resuelto de un líder indígena venezolano se convierte en el símbolo de protesta más importante de las etnias en Amazonas el 12 de octubre (The Unsolved Murder of a Venezuelan Indigenous Leader Becomes the Most Important Protest Symbol of the Ethnic Groups in Amazonas on October 12),” *Infobae*, October 9, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2022/10/09/el-asesinato-no-resuelto-de-un-lider-indigena-venezolano-se-convierte-en-el-simbolo-de-protesta-mas-importante-de-las-etnias-en-amazonas-el-12-de-octubre/>.

134 Samantha Schmidt, Ana Vanessa Herrero, and Janice Kai Chen, “The Gold-mining City That Is Destroying a Sacred Venezuelan Mountain,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/06/venezuela-yapacana-gold-mining/>.

135 Olnar Ortiz Bare (@olnartortizBare), “#URGENTE Nancy Herrera Pueblo Indígena Cubeo #Amazonas denuncia amenazas por Gnrnl Maita @ZODIAMAZONAS por video que se difundió en RRSS donde,” Twitter video, July 4, 2023, <https://twitter.com/olnartortizBare/status/1676324936384671744>.

136 “Militares tomaron casa de Nancy Herrera, líder indígena que habló sobre irregularidades durante Operación Autana (Military Took the House of Nancy Herrera, Indigenous Leader Who Spoke About Irregularities during Operation Autana),” *Efecto Cocuyo*, July 22, 2023, <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/militares-tomaron-casa-de-nancy-herrera-lider-indigena-que-hablo-sobre-irregularidades-durante-operacion-autana/>.

Reports from the Maduro regime indicated that around 11,500 miners were evicted from Yapacana National Park in September,<sup>137</sup> but indigenous people, human rights defenders, and miners claimed that it was a propaganda operation, and the miners returned to the mining areas after the official media coverage subsided.<sup>138</sup> Herrera, however, recorded on video a conversation in which she exposed the military falsehoods, and videos of the conversation were subsequently published on Twitter by Olnar Ortiz, Indigenous

peoples coordinator with the human rights defense organization Foro Penal. After the publication of the videos, Herrera received death threats. In related events, other members of the community were jailed, ten were injured, and three killed, according to Ortiz.<sup>139</sup> On December 28, 2023, Herrera appeared in a video posted to Ortiz's X account saying she was leaving clandestinely and that she was working "until we got to the truth" of the military actions in Yapacana National Park.<sup>140</sup>

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137 "Troops Dislodge 11,500 Illegal Miners from Venezuelan Reserve," France24, September 10, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230910-troops-dislodge-11-500-illegal-miners-from-venezuelan-reserve>.

138 "Is Evacuation of 8,600 Venezuelan Miners Just Another Smokescreen?," InSight Crime, August 23, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/news/is-evacuation-of-8600-venezuelan-miners-just-another-smokescreen/>.

139 Olnar Ortiz Bare (@olnarortizBare), "El jueves 19/10/2023, se consignó @MinpublicoVEN la denuncia del asesinato de Luis Manuel Higuera (13/09/23) En el marco Operación Autana. Por armas de guerra," Twitter video, October 24, 2023, <https://twitter.com/olnarortizBare/status/1716820864652734949>.

140 Olnar Ortiz Bare (@olnarortizBare), "#18Dic. #ULTIMAHORA Nancy Herrera defensora indígena de territorio quien fue golpeada y desplazada forzosamente," Twitter video, December 18, 2023, <https://twitter.com/olnarortizBare/status/1736714491654468082>.

## State-sponsored information operations

Venezuela is considered a high-capacity state actor for conducting information operations. Venezuelan information and influence operations combine social media (especially the Twitter/X platform),<sup>141</sup> a network of state media, public diplomacy, foreign influencers, and Venezuela-sponsored organizations in target countries.

Prior to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, the company actively engaged with Venezuelan civil society organizations investigating state-sponsored disinformation to identify networks of accounts on its platform that were used for malign influence campaigns. This collaboration with Venezuelan researchers was very positive and produced tangible results, including a better understanding of influence operations supporting the Maduro regime. However, following Musk's takeover of Twitter and the implementation of new rules regarding access to X's application programming interface (API), Venezuelan organizations investigating disinformation campaigns and analyzing coordinated manipulation of social media have faced more challenges in their work, similar to other academic and civil society researchers worldwide.

Venezuelan civil society organizations have noted that probing disinformation on X has become more challenging under Musk's ownership of the platform. C-Informa, an alliance of open source investigators and independent media,<sup>142</sup> described that dynamic in an investigation after Twitter's data accessibility via APIs was restricted.<sup>143</sup> They also noticed that X kept debunked posts sharing false claims of

electoral fraud in the Unitary Platform primaries (that were held to choose the consensus opposition candidate on October 22, 2023), and allowed the Maduro regime's allies to spread narratives against the democratic opposition. For instance, X reinstated the account for Cabello's TV program, @ConElMazoDado, which was previously suspended and is once again spreading falsehoods about the opposition and harassing its leaders.<sup>144</sup>

In the following subsections, the DFRLab reports on earlier state-run campaigns on then-Twitter and operations run by disinformation for-hire agents with ties to the regime. Additionally, there is discussion of a Chavism operation using artificially generated video and other AI applications incorporated into the Chavism toolkit early in 2023. After that, the DFRLab looks at data on Venezuelan operations targeting audiences in other countries, including operations conducted in Africa attempting to influence the case of Alex Saab, who was indicted in the United States for laundering money from an illegal bribery scheme.<sup>145</sup> Also, the report refers to operations for influencing elections in other Latin American countries, as well as hemispheric operations against international sanctions for human rights violations and the boycott of the 2022 Summit of the Americas. Finally, the report refers to collaboration on information operations among Venezuela and other authoritarian countries, such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Cuba.

141 "Estrategias de Guerra Informativa Del Chavismo en Twitter (Chavismo's Information Warfare Strategies on Twitter)," Observatorio de (Des) Información y Propaganda en Latinoamérica, September 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/462743161/Estrategias-de-Guerra-Informativa-del-Chavismo-en-Twitter>.

142 Medianálisis, *Efecto Cocuyo*, *El Estímulo*, Cazadores de Fake News, and ProBox are the members of C-Informa.

143 "#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: El Mazo y las redes anónimas se unen para desinformar (#Cyber-allianceUncovered: El Mazo and Anonymous Networks Join Forces to Misinform)," ProBox, November 21, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-el-mazo-y-las-redes-anonimas-se-unen-para-desinformar>.

144 "#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto," ProBox.

145 "Colombian Businessman Charged with Money Laundering Extradited to the United States from Cabo Verde," Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice, October 18, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/colombian-businessman-charged-money-laundering-extradited-united-states-cabo-verde>.

## State-run information operations and disinformation for hire

The Maduro regime propaganda apparatus often uses questionable tactics on social media that deploy official accounts of its ministries and security forces alongside accounts operated by real citizens who receive rewards in the form of money, such as the case of the Tuiteros de la Patria (Homeland Tweeters).<sup>146</sup> These users coordinate, often using government-provided hashtags and language, in order to manipulate trending topics and influence public opinion. According to an analysis by ProBox on trending topics (via hashtags or keywords) related to politics and social issues used in the first semester of 2023,<sup>147</sup> Twitter accounts supporting the Maduro regime were responsible for 178 million out of 183 million posts on sociopolitical topics, which is equal to 97.2 percent of the conversation. The ministry of communication and information (i.e., Popular para la Comunicación e Información, or MIPPCI), was the most active institution behind the promotion of trending topics supporting the regime, with 213 out of 474 trending topics amplified. Accounts associated with civil society organizations and activists promoted twenty-nine trending topics that garnered 232,153 posts, mostly about protests related to salaries, human rights violations, scarcity of fuel, and failures in public services.

Disinformation-for-hire operations are also common, with several small companies and so-called influencers operating in the space. Such is the case of Keisbel Giménez, who had worked for the regime since 2017.<sup>148</sup> Giménez operates the X and Instagram accounts named @niTanTukky,<sup>149</sup> which have coordinated campaigns attacking opposition

leaders and promoting pro-Maduro narratives that are later replicated on other social media platforms and in online media.<sup>150</sup>

The opposition primaries in Venezuela in October 2023 witnessed orchestrated strategies and online attacks against opposition candidates and democratic institutions. According to ProBox, Cabello and “anonymous networks,” which are linked to Giménez, combined efforts in a sustained and synchronized campaign of disinformation.<sup>151</sup> This collaboration involved amplifying hashtags on X, such as #MariaCorinaEsLeopoldo (#MariaCorinalsLeopoldo) and #LosLujosDeLeopoldo (#TheLuxuriesOfLeopoldo). On X, accounts aligned with Cabello and Giménez coordinated behind at least eight hashtags to foster false information, smears, and assaults on the electoral process and its candidates. These campaigns persisted even after the conclusion of the primaries, underscoring their organized nature.

ProBox identified that, beginning on June 14, 2023, Cabello’s TV show, *Con el Mazo Dando*, served as a launching pad for discrediting opposition primaries. Cabello initiated hashtags like #NiPorLasBuenasNiPorLasMalas (#NeitherByCivilityNorByForce) to propagate a narrative of inevitable defeat for the opposition in the upcoming presidential elections. ProBox also found that Cabello promoted seven hashtags across eight episodes leading up to October 22 in an effort to amplify a biased perspective and discredit any potential opposition victory and the electoral process more generally.

146 Tuiteros de la Patria is a large group of X users that amplify in a coordinated way on an almost daily basis regime-generated hashtags and talking points promoted by the account of the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información (also known in Spanish by its acronym MIPPCI). The users can receive financial remuneration for amplifying the messages. The Tuiteros de la Patria operation has been monitored since 2018, predating the platform’s rebranding. See Iria Puyosa, “Venezuelan Government Strategies for Information War on Twitter,” Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Brown University, September 9, 2018, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN\\_ID3459724\\_code3727516.pdf?abstractid=3459724&mirid=1&type=2](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID3459724_code3727516.pdf?abstractid=3459724&mirid=1&type=2); and Daniel Suárez Pérez and Esteban Ponce de León, “Digital Autocracy: Maduro’s Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment,” DFRLab and Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, Atlantic Council, March 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DigitalAutocracyVEN-FINAL.pdf>; and “Sin RT no hay paraíso: ¿cómo funciona la maquinaria de propaganda en Twitter de Nicolás Maduro? (No RT, No Paradise: How Nicolás Maduro’s Twitter Propaganda Machine Works),” Cazadores de Fake News, February 13, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/sin-rt-no-hay-paraíso-maquinaria-de-propaganda-en-twitter-de-nicolas-maduro/>.

147 “El Oficialismo y su control de Twitterzuela en lo que va de 2023,” ProBox, September 19, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/el-oficialismo-y-su-control-de-twitterzuela-en-lo-que-va-de-2023>.

148 Adrián González, “Al descubierto: La Fábrica de Desinformación en Instagram que amenaza a la democracia en Venezuela,” Cazadores de Fake News, March 12, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/al-descubierto-la-fabrica-de-desinformacion-en-instagram-que-amenaza-a-la-democracia-en-venezuela/>.

149 “#AlertaVenezuela: September 08, 2020,” DFRLab’s Atlantic Council, September 8, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-september-08-2020/>.

150 “#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto,” ProBox.

151 “#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto,” ProBox.

With Giménez’s support, Cabello’s campaign content spread across multiple social media platforms, including X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, perpetuating coordinated disinformation campaigns that targeted specific opposition figures and, in this case, that attempted to invalidate Maria Corina Machado’s primary victory.

Beyond its own borders, for over a decade, Venezuela has undertaken influence operations in support of candidates with ties to Chavismo in elections in Latin America and Europe. Among recent cases are those of Andrés Arauz, the runner-up in Ecuador’s 2021 presidential election,<sup>152</sup> and Xiomara Castro, the winner of the 2021 Honduran presidential election. Castro’s digital campaign was developed by Venqis, a company that also supported the gubernatorial election campaign of Jorge Arreaza, Hugo Chávez’s son-in-law.<sup>153</sup> Venqis is another example of how the Maduro regime has also deployed operations using private companies.

## Disinformation operations in the opposition primaries and the 2024 presidential elections

At the time of writing, the Maduro regime and its allies continued to spin discussions surrounding political events, from Venezuela’s 2023 primary elections to the lead-up to presidential elections scheduled for July 28, 2024. The digital conversation on the electoral process witnessed intense disinformation campaigns orchestrated primarily by well-known entities aligned with the Maduro regime and identified in previous operations that targeted Venezuela’s electoral processes and other democratic events.

Between July and October 22, 2023, C-Infirma monitored malicious activities, finding the dissemination of mostly false narratives aimed at discrediting opposition candidates and casting

doubt on the electoral process.<sup>154</sup> The escalation of disinformation campaigns was catalyzed by three networks of platforms known for spreading false information: the above-mentioned astroturfing network—campaigns that simulate to amplify content organically while hiding the real objectives and creators involved—on X attributed to Cabello and niTanTukky, La Fábrica de Desinformación (The Disinformation Factory) on Instagram,<sup>155</sup> and the YouTube channels Venezolandia, RecordVen Music, and Cambio Venezuela, all of which shared videos with misleading content and which covered propaganda that also appeared on Instagram and X. These networks employed a variety of deceptive tactics, including generating deepfake voice content via AI, paid advertisements on YouTube to amplify misinformation, and coordinated campaigns across multiple social media platforms.

As shown before, Cabello and Giménez orchestrated joint strategies and appeared among the most prolific actors on social media platforms or television channels attacking opposition leaders. C-Infirma also identified other online campaigns that also fueled offline and judicial attacks targeting opposition candidates, public workers, and electoral institutions. Moreover, the orchestrated dissemination of false information through social media and traditional platforms resulted in a campaign intended to cast doubt, specifically in accusing the electoral process of being misleading, illegal, and unconstitutional and in labeling it as fraudulent.

C-Infirma pointed out the emergence of deceptive narratives related to elections dramatically increased between July and October 2023, amounting to nine on average per month. Between February and June 2023, C-Infirma detected on average two misleading narratives per month. The misleading narratives after July 2023 predominantly targeted specific candidates, such as Machado, in an attempt to disqualify her from electoral

152 Sarai Coscojuela, “Tendencias a favor del candidato Andrés Arauz se promovieron desde Venezuela (Trends in Favor of Candidate Andres Arauz Were Promoted from Venezuela),” *Runrun.es*, May 12, 2021, <https://runrun.es/rr-es-plus/443471/tendencias-a-favor-del-candidato-andres-arauz-se-promovieron-desde-venezuela/>.

153 “Conexión Venezuela-Panamá: ¿quiénes desarrollaron a VenApp? (Venezuela-Panama Connection: Who Developed VenApp?),” *Cazadores de Fake News*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/conexion-venezuela-panama-quienes-desarrollaron-a-venapp/>.

154 “La narrativa del “fraude” contra las primarias convocó a viejos conocidos de la desinformación en Venezuela (The “Fraud” Narrative against the Primaries Summoned Old Acquaintances of Disinformation in Venezuela),” C-Infirma, November 7, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/la-narrativa-del-fraude-contra-las-primarias-convoco-a-viejos-conocidos-de-la-desinformacion-en-venezuela/>.

155 “Al descubierto: La Fábrica de Desinformación en Instagram que amenaza a la democracia en Venezuela (Uncovered: The Disinformation Factory on Instagram that Threatens Democracy in Venezuela),” *Cazadores de Fake News*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/al-descubierto-la-fabrica-de-desinformacion-en-instagram-que-amenaza-a-la-democracia-en-venezuela/>.



participation or to associate her with violent incidents.

Although pro-Maduro networks were prevalent in the conversation, ProBox highlighted that the #Primarias2023 (#Primaries2023) hashtag trended on X for three consecutive days, fostering organic conversation promoting participation on election day. #Primarias2023 emerged as a pivotal moment on social media, registering over 230,000 tweets comprising 92.3 percent of genuine user-generated content, significantly surpassing the average pro-Maduro-led trends. ProBox identified a failed attempt by Maduro supporters and the regime to discredit the opposition's consultation through hashtags like #NoTeVistasQueNoVas (“#DoNotDressUpThatYouAreNotGoing”) and later #MegaFraude (“MegaFraud”), indicating the shift from generally discrediting the event to alleging fraud. The X conversation highlighted the opposition's digital resurgence amid efforts to control the narrative by pro-Maduro forces, underscoring the continued importance of social media platforms in countering censorship and disinformation in Venezuela.<sup>156</sup>

The latter phase of the presidential elections also showed malign efforts, with social media accounts and public television channels amplifying campaigns to boost Maduro while thwarting opposition efforts toward democratic participation.

According to a ProBox investigation, eighty-eight hashtags supporting Maduro on X accumulated over 8,462,776 tweets from January 2023 to April 30, 2024. Notably, accounts linked to Maduro-controlled institutions actively pushed hashtags to support Maduro's candidacy across other platforms

like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These campaigns extended beyond social media, as the public television programs *Con El Mazo Dando* and singing contest *Factor M* both amplified the Maduro regime's propaganda, while the former also incorporated attacks on opposition candidates.<sup>157</sup>

ProBox concluded that the use of institutional assets and the promotion of Maduro's candidacy since mid-2023, even before Maduro formally registered as a candidate, were public actions on digital platforms that the National Electoral Council's regulations deem irregular and gave an advantage to Maduro.

## The use of AI-generated content in Venezuelan information operations

Since 2021, the Maduro regime has been using content generated through artificial intelligence to disinform. Venezuelan counterdisinformation outlet Cazadores de Fake News reported in 2021 how a Twitter bot network supporting Alex Saab used images in its avatars produced through a generative adversarial network (GAN).<sup>158</sup> Also, in late 2021 and early 2022, researchers observed Twitter accounts with AI-generated profile pictures propagating misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, though the researchers did not find evidence tying the accounts to the Venezuelan government.<sup>159</sup>

Later, on February 2, 2023, Venezuela became the first country in the Western Hemisphere to deploy AI-generated video in a state-sponsored disinformation campaign.<sup>160</sup> House of News, an English-language YouTube channel, featured a series of videos about the supposed economic recovery in Venezuela, which it said was characterized by a consumption boom and many

156 “De #Primarias2023 a #MegaFraude: La batalla digital en Venezuela (From #Primaries2023 to #MegaFraud: The Digital Battle in Venezuela),” ProBox, October 26, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/de-primarias2023-a-megafraude-la-batalla-digital-en-venezuela>.

157 “La máquina del poder: cómo Maduro teje su red propagandística (The Power Machine: How Maduro Weaves His Propaganda Network),” ProBox, May 20, 2024, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/la-maquina-del-poder-como-maduro-teje-su-red-propagandistica/>.

158 “Veo gente que no existe (y gatos también) [I See People That Don't Exist (and Cats Too)],” Cazadores de Fake News, August 30, 2022, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/veo-gente-que-no-existe-y-gatos-tambien/>.

159 Iria Puyosa et al., “Information Disorders Propagated in Venezuela via WhatsApp and Social Media amid the COVID19 pandemic,” ININCO-Universidad Central de Venezuela, *Venezuela Inteligente*, 2021, 13, accessed November 15, 2023, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350849927\\_Information\\_Disorders\\_Propagated\\_in\\_Venezuela\\_via\\_WhatsApp\\_and\\_Social\\_Media\\_amid\\_the\\_COVID19\\_pandemic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350849927_Information_Disorders_Propagated_in_Venezuela_via_WhatsApp_and_Social_Media_amid_the_COVID19_pandemic).

160 Allie Funk, Adrian Shahbaz, and Kian Vesteinsson, *Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence*, Freedom House, October 13, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence#key-findings>. According to *Freedom on the Net*, AI-generated video was observed in disinformation operations in sixteen other countries in the last year. However, only in two cases its deployment can be attributed to a state: China and Venezuela. Both operations used a similar tactic. China's Wolf News appeared at the end of 2022 in social media, and according to Graphika, “In late 2022, Graphika observed limited instances of Spamouflage, a pro-Chinese influence operation (IO), promoting content that included video footage of fictitious people almost certainly created using artificial intelligence techniques. . . . Despite featuring lifelike AI-generated avatars, the Spamouflage videos we reviewed were low-quality and spammy in nature. Additionally, none of the identified Spamouflage videos received more than 300 views, reflecting this actor's long-standing challenges in producing convincing political content that generates authentic online engagement.” For more on Wolf News, see “Deepfake It Till You Make It,” Graphika, February, 2023, <https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika-report-deepfake-it-til-you-make-it.pdf>.

tourists visiting the country. House of News also had a Facebook page. Venezuelan state television media later picked up the videos, telling their audience that it was a US newswire. On YouTube, the videos obtained between 100,000 and 300,000 views each before they were debunked. The series presenters were generated through Synthesia, an artificial intelligence video generation platform.<sup>161</sup> YouTube removed the channel; on Facebook, the channel has been inactive.

Cazadores de Fake News identified on September 7, 2023, at least three other YouTube channels that similarly promoted Maduro's propaganda and targeted opposition candidates' presidential campaigns. These three channels were linked to House of News through their advertiser information.<sup>162</sup>

Venezuelan journalist Florantonia Singer revealed the use of these AI-generated videos in a report for the Spanish newspaper *El País* in February 2023.<sup>163</sup> Several shows on the Venezuelan state television channel VTV, including a news program featuring Maduro himself, all subsequently attacked Singer.<sup>164</sup> Mario Silva, a well-known Chavist propagandist, virulently attacked Singer in several broadcasts of his program, including a cheap-fake video in which he ridiculed her.<sup>165</sup> Pro-regime botnets and the Venezuelan communications minister also harassed Singer on Twitter.

Maduro also interacts with Sira, an AI-generated presenter, during his weekly show "Con Maduro," on which he comments on his administration's policies.<sup>166</sup> A robot-like character is also featured on Maduro's TikTok.

## Information operations related to the indictment of Alex Saab

A vast web of information operations, launched in mid-2020, attempted to fight the charges of money laundering, bribery, and other violations of the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) that Colombian businessman and Maduro ally Alex Saab faced in United States.<sup>167</sup>

The campaign to interfere with the judicial process against Saab has been one of the most far-reaching social media operations run by the regime.<sup>168</sup> Between August and September 2020, bot-like accounts inauthentically amplified hashtags on Twitter supporting Saab. The network advocated for Saab's release by directing messages in Spanish, English, and Portuguese toward Cape Verde's government and judiciary authorities, which were holding Saab at the time.<sup>169</sup> Between January and June 2021, the operation extended to Nigeria,<sup>170</sup> Senegal, and Ghana.<sup>171</sup> The coordinated campaign used accounts operated by influencers from those countries to push hashtags to trend along

161 "¿Artificial? Sí. ¿Inteligentes? No tanto. (Artificial? Yes. Intelligent? Not So Much)," Cazadores de Fake News, February 23, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/artificial-si-inteligentes-no-tanto/>.

162 "Operación responsable de 'House of News' ahora dirige su desinformación en contra de las primarias opositoras (Operation 'House of News' Now Directs Its Disinformation against the Opposition Primaries)," Cazadores de Fake News, September 7, 2023, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/operacion-responsable-de-house-of-news-dirige-desinformacion-primarias/>.

163 Florantonia Singer, "No son periodistas, son avatares: el chavismo impulsa propaganda hecha con inteligencia artificial (They Are Not Journalists, They Are Avatars: Chavism Promotes Propaganda Made with Artificial Intelligence)," *El País*, February 20, 2023, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-02-20/no-son-periodistas-son-avatares-el-chavismo-impulsa-propaganda-hecha-con-inteligencia-artificial.html>.

164 Gabriela Gonzalez (@GabyGabyGG), "Maduro califica de 'depredador de la verdad' al diario @elpais\_america por su nota sobre la utilización de inteligencia artificial por parte de su gobierno," Twitter video, February 22, 2023, <https://twitter.com/GabyGabyGG/status/1628511508165451781>.

165 Mario Silva (@hojillasilva), "INTELIGENTZIA ARTIFIZIAL DEL <http://país.COM> ¡SIN COMENTARIOS!," Twitter video, February 24, 2023, <https://twitter.com/hojillasilva/status/1629158140041207810>.

166 Yeny García and Álvaro Algarra, "Sira, la «asistente» artificial de Maduro que levanta polémica en Venezuela (Sira, Maduro's Artificial "Assistant" That Raises Controversy in Venezuela)," *Voice of America* (Spanish edition), April 28, 2023, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/sira-la-asistente-ia-de-maduro-que-levanta-polemica-en-venezuela/7071011.html>.

167 For more on Alex Saab, see "Álex Saab," InSight Crime, January 27, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/alex-saab-2/>; "Colombian Businessman Charged with Money Laundering Extradited to the United States from Cabo Verde," Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice.

168 "Logbook of pro-Alex Saab's Cyber Information Operation," Cazadores de Fake News, October 24, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/logbook-alex-saabs-cyber-infoop/>.

169 "Los amigobots de Alex Saab en Twitter," Cazadores de Fake News, September 27, 2020, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/amigobots-que-defienden-a-saab/>.

170 "#FreeAlexSaab en Twitter: entre bots, trolls nigerianos y amigos (#FreeAlexSaab on Twitter: Between Bots, Nigerian Trolls and Friends)," Cazadores de Fake News, February 22, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/freealexsaab-en-twitter/>.

171 "Operación Alex Ghana: campaña de influencia a favor de Alex Saab en Ghana impulsada por 'laboratorio' de Twitter (Operation Alex Ghana: Influence Campaign in Favor of Alex Saab in Ghana Driven by Twitter 'Lab')," Cazadores de Fake News, June 10, 2021, <https://cazadoresdefakenews.info/operacion-alex-ghana/>.

with diplomatic and political pressure on African authorities.<sup>172</sup>

The campaign aimed to influence the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States to rule against Saab's extradition to the United States. Subsequently, the West African Court ordered to halt the process of extraditing Saab.<sup>173</sup> Still, the Cape Verde Supreme Court granted the extradition,<sup>174</sup> and Saab was released to the United States to face trial.<sup>175</sup>

Accounts belonging to high-ranking regime officials also participated in the #FreeSaab campaign, alongside accounts with bot-like features, trolls, and those with stolen identities of influential journalists and other Twitter users. In 2021, an astroturf campaign appeared under the name of the "Alex Saab Volunteer Movement" (Movimiento Voluntario Alex Saab). The accounts involved in the campaign coordinated on the publication of thousands of tweets each day and used dozens of hashtags related to the Saab case. In parallel, anonymous troll networks smeared and harassed journalists, impugning their investigations into Saab's corruption and his direct ties to Maduro. For example, Cazadores de Fake News identified a small group of bot-like accounts that seemingly coordinated in the use of the hashtag #DenizExtorsionador (Deniz Extortionist),<sup>176</sup> which targets journalist Roberto Deniz, who was writing extensively on Alex Saab for investigative outlet Armando.info.<sup>177</sup>

On December 19, 2023, the US government released Saab to the Venezuelan government in

exchange for twenty-five people incarcerated by the Maduro regime, including ten US citizens. The prisoner swap occurred amid the direct negotiations between the United States and Venezuela to hold fair elections in the South American country in 2024.<sup>178</sup> The deal included swapping Saab for Leonard Glenn Francis, aka "Fat Leonard," a defense contractor who pleaded guilty to a bribery scheme involving the US Navy's 7th Fleet in the largest corruption scandal in US military history.<sup>179</sup> In 2022, Francis fled California, where he was awaiting sentence, and landed in Caracas, where he requested asylum but was jailed instead. Two former Green Berets, Luke Denman and Airan Berry, who participated in a coastline incursion into Venezuela in 2020, known as the Gedeon Operation, were also part of the swap. Among the other people released as a part of the swap were seven labor unionists; Roberto Abdul, a technical adviser to the organizing committee of the Unitary Platform primary; and six individuals detained for having provided services to Matthew John Heath, accused by Venezuela of being a US spy and who had been previously released.<sup>180</sup> The identity of two of the liberated US citizens has been kept secret, alleging privacy protection.<sup>181</sup>

Upon Saab's arrival in Venezuela, Maduro appointed him to be the president of the International Center for Productive Investment, an agency under the Vice Presidency. Its main responsibility is to attract investors for businesses in the energy, mining, steel, tourism, and food sectors.

172 Craig Silverman, "Why Do a Bunch of Nigerian Twitter Influencers Want This Alleged Money Launderer to Go Free? They're Being Paid," BuzzFeed News (now defunct), April 9, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/nigerian-twitter-campaign-alex-saab>.

173 Katarina Hoije, Ben Bartenstein, and Henrique Almeida, "Court Orders Maduro Financier Be Released by Cape Verde," Bloomberg, March 15, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-15/west-african-court-orders-cape-verde-to-free-maduro-financier>.

174 Ben Bartenstein, Katarina Hoije, and Henrique Almeida, "Maduro Financier Faces Extradition to U.S. After New Ruling," Bloomberg, March 18, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-17/maduro-financier-faces-extradition-to-u-s-after-court-ruling>.

175 Brian Ellsworth, "U.S. Appeals Court Declines to Rule on Diplomatic Status of Maduro Ally Saab," Reuters, May 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-appeals-court-declines-rule-diplomatic-status-maduro-ally-saab-2022-05-02/>.

176 "El acoso online contra Roberto Deniz y su conexión con la campaña de defensa a Alex Saab (#PeriodistasDifamados I) [The Online Harassment against Roberto Deniz and Its Connection to the Alex Saab Defense Campaign (#DefamedJournalists I)]," Cazadores de Fake News, December 11, 2021, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/acoso-online-contra-roberto-deniz-periodistasdifamados-i>.

177 For more on Deniz's research at ArmandoInfo, see <https://armando.info/en/author/roberto-deniz/>.

178 White House, "Statement from President Joe Biden on Securing the Release of Americans Detained in Venezuela," December 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/20/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-securing-the-release-of-americans-detained-in-venezuela/#:~:text=As%20we%20welcome%20home%20our,my%20Administration%20since%20day%20one>.

179 Samantha Schmidt, Ana Vanessa Herrero, and Craig Whitlock, "Venezuela Hands over 'Fat Leonard,' Mastermind in U.S. Navy Scandal," *Washington Post*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/20/fat-leonard-venezuela-prisoner-swap/>.

180 "¿Quiénes son los presos políticos canjeados por Alex Saab? (Who Are the Political Prisoners Exchanged by Alex Saab?)," Runrun.es and Correo del Caroní, December 21, 2023, <https://correodelcaroni.com/pais-politico/quienes-son-los-presos-politicos-canjeados-por-alex-saab/>.

181 Details about the negotiations for the release of the US citizens imprisoned in Venezuela and the torture they endured during their years in prison were disclosed in this news piece. See Adam Ciralsky, "Embedding with America's Top Hostage Negotiator," *Vanity Fair*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/americas-top-hostage-negotiator-exclusive>.

## Hemispheric and global information operations linked to the Venezuelan regime

Venezuela has coordinated beyond its borders, including anti-sanctions campaigns in alignment with Cuba,<sup>182</sup> Nicaragua, and Russia. Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua have also, at times, coordinated their social media operations and spread narratives of resistance to US imperialism.<sup>183</sup> Fringe digital outlets such as *Grayzone*, *Peoples Dispatch*, and *Break Through News* amplify Venezuelan narratives in English. Likewise, nongovernmental organizations associated with the Venezuelan regime, such as Code Pink, carry out campaigns in support of Cuba's and Venezuela's interests in the United States.<sup>184</sup> These proxies spread narratives opposing international sanctions for human rights violations, alleging that these measures are acts of imperialism. Among others, Russia's RT en Español and China's Xinhua Español both amplify Venezuela's anti-sanctions narratives.<sup>185</sup>

In 2022, Venezuela campaigned for a broad boycott of the Summit of the Americas,<sup>186</sup> after the United States announced that Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua would not be invited to it.<sup>187</sup> The White House launched a series of talks to counter the boycott and ensure the presence of most heads of state.<sup>188</sup> In the end, the heads of state of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Bolivia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Kitts and

Nevis, and Grenada did not attend the Summit.<sup>189</sup> (The head of state of Uruguay did not attend either, though it was due to a last-minute COVID-19 diagnosis.) The 2022 meeting in Los Angeles had the lowest participation of heads of state since the Summit of the Americas was first held in 1994.

The Maduro regime, Russia, and China have also coordinated to spread narratives favorable to authoritarian countries while attacking the United States and Europe, as happened alongside the 2023 European Union-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit and the 2023 BRICS summit in South Africa.<sup>190</sup>

Beyond these events, Venezuelan assets have contributed to spread Russian narratives regarding the Ukraine invasion. There is alignment between accounts associated with the Maduro regime and the Russian embassies in Latin America. Between the start of the Ukraine invasion and early June 2022, ProBox found that the Maduro regime's official accounts pushed nineteen pro-Russian trending topics.<sup>191</sup> By June 25, 2023, Maduro's Ministry of Communications promoted the hashtag #VenezuelaConPutin to express the Venezuelan regime's support for Russian President Vladimir Putin amid the uprising by the Wagner group in Russia. #VenezuelaConPutin appeared in around 340,000 tweets that day. A September 2022 report by Transparencia Venezuela detailed the collaboration between the two authoritarian regimes.<sup>192</sup>

182 Esteban Ponce de León and Daniel Suárez Pérez, "Cuba-linked Twitter Activity Trends in Venezuela," DFRLab, June 30, 2020, <https://dfrlab.org/2020/06/30/cuba-linked-twitter-activity-trends-in-venezuela/>.

183 Iria Puyosa and Marivi Marín Vázquez, "Deepening the Response to Authoritarian Information Operations in Latin America," National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies, November 28, 2023, <https://www.ned.org/deepening-the-response-to-authoritarian-information-operations-in-latin-america/>.

184 Jeanfreddy Gutiérrez Torres, "Portals of Lies: The International Swarm of 'Independent Media' at the Service of Chavista Narratives," ProBox, March 24, 2023, <https://proboxve.org/en-US/publicacion/portales-de-la-mentira-como-es-el-enjambre-internacional-de-medios-independientes-al-servicio-de-las-narrativas-chavistas>.

185 Puyosa and Marín Vázquez, "Deepening the Response."

186 Dave Lawler, "Boycott Threats Loom over Upcoming Summit of the Americas," *Axios*, May 12, 2022 <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/13/boycott-summit-americas-cuba-venezuela>.

187 Rafael Bernal, "Top US Diplomat: Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua Won't Be Invited to Summit of the Americas," *Hill*, May 2, 2022, <https://thehill.com/latino/3474186-top-us-diplomat-cuba-venezuela-nicaragua-wont-be-invited-to-summit-of-the-americas/>.

188 Franco Ordoñez, "U.S. Adviser Tries to Talk Mexican President Out of Skipping Summit of the Americas," National Public Radio, May 19, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/19/1099935416/u-s-adviser-tries-to-talk-mexican-president-out-of-skipping-summit-of-the-americas/>.

189 Kevin Liptak, "Snubs from Key Leaders at Summit of the Americas Reveal Biden's Struggle to Assert US Leadership in Its Neighborhood," CNN, June 8, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/07/politics/summit-of-the-americas-joe-biden/index.html>.

190 Iria Puyosa, "Pro-Russian BRICS Narratives in Latin America Prospered during Summit Lead-up," Atlantic Council's DFRLab, September 6, 2023, <https://dfrlab.org/2023/09/06/pro-russian-brics-narratives-in-latin-america-prospered-during-summit-lead-up/>.

191 "Maduro extiende su apoyo a la propaganda de Rusia en Twitter de Venezuela (Maduro Extends His Support to Russia's Propaganda on Venezuela's Twitter)," ProBox, March 15, 2022, <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/maduro-extiende-su-apoyo-a-la-propaganda-de-rusia-en-twitter-en-venezuela>.

192 "Russia and Venezuela: Allies in Disinformation," Transparencia Venezuela, September 30, 2022, <https://transparenciave.org/inform-russia-and-venezuela-allies-in-disinformation/>.

**Figure 3.** English translation of operational orders received by state-media journalists with guidelines from Venezuela's Information and Communication Ministry for the coverage of the Ukraine invasion leaked to fact-checkers EsPaja.

Instructions issued by the Ministry of Information and Communications to journalists working in the state-run media outlet on the treatment of information related to the war in Ukraine:

- Regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in accordance with the position of the Venezuelan State, our editorial line must dismantle the anti-Russian trends.
- There is a silent advance of NATO against this allied nation, which intensified after the coup d'état in Ukraine.
- Venezuela is not impartial, since we have been under attack for 20 years by the same NATO actors (USA and EU).
- Watch regularly for official statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense and President Putin.
- Stay vigilant. Neither our information agenda nor the terms or glossaries can be dictated by NATO.
- **There is no invasion of Ukraine. Special operations were launched to protect the population from the genocide of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi government.**
- It is important to define it as neo-Nazi.

Source: "Russia and Venezuela: Allies in Disinformation," Transparencia Venezuela; reproduced by permission.

Under its policy on state-linked information operations, Twitter deactivated several networks undertaking Venezuelan influence operations between January 2019 and December 2021.<sup>193</sup> In January 2019, Twitter removed a network of Venezuelan accounts spamming polarizing content related to the US 2018 midterm elections.<sup>194</sup> In June 2019, Twitter removed a small network of Venezuelan accounts linked to the Catalan separatist movement.

In April 2022, Twitter removed a troll network spreading propaganda and disinformation in Venezuela, Bolivia, Panamá, and the Dominican Republic. This troll network was operated by Venquis, the same company that developed VENapp, a smartphone app that Maduro has promoted; it features Telegram-like public channels

for spreading information and unencrypted individual-to-individual chats.<sup>195</sup>

Also, there have been campaigns coordinated with Turkey and the troll army of its Justice and Development Party (abbreviated as AKP in Turkish), such as that around the hashtag #WeAreMaduro<sup>196</sup>: In January 2019, when the Venezuelan National Assembly convened for Guaidó's oath as interim president, the ruling Turkish party, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, deployed a campaign in support of Maduro, using the hashtag #WeAreMaduro, which became a global trending topic. High-ranking AKP officers, including then-presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin (now Turkey's intelligence chief), participated in the campaign to express support for the Maduro regime.<sup>197</sup>

193 See Twitter Moderation Research Consortium, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/information-operations.html>.

194 For more on networks related to Venezuela deactivated by Twitter, see Meysam Alizadeh et al., "Content-based Features Predict Social Media Influence Operations," *Science*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/sciadv.abb5824>; Yoel Roth, "Empowering Further Research of Potential Information Operations," X blog (then Twitter), January 31, 2019, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/further\\_research\\_information\\_operations](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/further_research_information_operations); and Yoel Roth, "Information Operations on Twitter: Principles, Process, and Disclosure," X blog (then Twitter), June 13, 2019, [https://blog.x.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter](https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter), April 21, 2022, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/twitter-suspended-352-accounts-trollsvq/>.

195 "Twitter Suspended 352 Accounts from a Latin American Troll Farm," Cazadores de Fake News, April 21, 2022, <https://www.cazadoresdefakenews.info/twitter-suspended-352-accounts-trollsvq/>.

196 Dorian Jones, "Turkey's Erdogan Stands Firm with Venezuela's Maduro," Voice of America, January 25, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-s-erdogan-stands-firm-with-venezuela-s-maduro/4758691.html>.

197 Ibrahim Kalin (@ikalın1), "Cumhurbaşkanımız, Venezuela Devlet Başkanı Nicolas Maduro'yu arayarak Türkiye'nin desteğini ifade etti ve "Maduro kardeşim! Dik dur, yanındayız" dedi," X (then Twitter), January 23, 2019, <https://twitter.com/ikalın1/status/1088213227274674177>.

## State surveillance

The privacy of communications in Venezuela has been seriously eroded, placing journalists, rights defenders, activists, and politicians at severe risk of surveillance and, potentially, reprisal. The lack of the rule of law and criminalization imperils the work of civil society organizations, independent journalists, and opposition activists. Other forms of digital surveillance, in addition to the risk of exposure to sensitive materials, are present in physical spaces, including networks of informants and in face-to-face interactions with security forces.

The surveillance apparatus seems to work as a dragnet, capturing specific types of data from large numbers of Venezuelans while also performing highly targeted surveillance, trying to capture as much information as possible from a more select group of targets, sometimes using multiple methods simultaneously. The surveillance apparatus reports to the Office of the President. The Strategic Center for Security and Protection of the Homeland, which reports directly to the president, oversees all state security operations. The command, control, and telecommunications center VEN911, as well as the policing areas known as peace quadrants, are overseen by the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, specifically by the Directorate of Prevention and Citizen Security. The National Telecommunications Commission is responsible for monitoring telephone communications and internet traffic. The sistema Patria (Homeland system) is part of the Patria Foundation, which is under the Vice Presidency.

The Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) is the security force in charge of political intelligence, counterintelligence, and government investigations, formally subordinate to the vice president of Venezuela. SEBIN has direct access to CONATEL reports of phone monitoring and street surveillance, and it counts on informants dubbed “cooperative patriots.” SEBIN runs major

torture centers in the country, including El Helicoide and The Tomb, an underground detention facility beneath the central subway station in the heart of Caracas.<sup>198</sup>

The Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) is Venezuela’s military counterintelligence agency. It formally reports to the Ministry of Defense and has access to surveillance technology. Its operations are mainly focused on active military personnel, including high-ranking officers, and aim to “coup-proof” the regime. At the time of writing, 148 military officers were in prison in the DGCIM incarceration centers.

In the following subsections, the DFRLab looks at some of the systems deployed by the Venezuelan state for widespread surveillance. The most salient is the Homeland system, a national all-encompassing system that interoperates with social welfare, vehicle licenses, and many other national databases by using the national identification number. The report points out what is known about social media and messaging app monitoring, which seems to rely on a combination of software and snitches, the so-called cooperative patriots. After that, the report provides information about wiretapping and interception of phone communications, monitoring of internet traffic, cellphone network monitoring, unauthorized state access to information stored in digital devices, state-sponsored phishing, and street video surveillance.

### Applications for massive data gathering and video surveillance

The Homeland digital control system encompasses an identification card, an app, and a web portal. To register in the system, a user must enter an identity number, phone number, email address, sex, date of birth, and home address. Other data populates automatically without users entering it, seemingly by interoperation with several national government

<sup>198</sup> “Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” United Nations Human Rights Council.

databases including those of the vehicle registration and driver licenses agency (INTT) and the social security agency (IVSS). The Homeland system can be linked to the electoral registration database as well, by using the national ID number. The system currently has three levels of users: regular users; public administration employees, who can access features associated with the agencies they are part of; and institutional users, whose verified status is supposed to provide access to more information and features.

The Homeland System reports 21.9 million registered users—nearly 90 percent of the Venezuelan adult population. Initially, only loyalist PSUV members registered, but over the years, even people who have always supported opposition efforts have registered in order to access welfare programs, including social security pensions. In 2021, the Ministry of Health also used the system's Homeland Card to trace COVID-19's potential spread and to assign appointments for vaccination. This drove up the registration rate as most of the population wanted to get vaccinated, and the only way to access the COVID-19 vaccine was through this system.

The most well-known use of the system is the administration of discretionary cash transfers, but the system allows many other transactions including using the card to pay for utilities such as electricity, water, domestic natural gas, and telephone service from a state-owned telecommunications company. Individuals can use the card to purchase fuel at gas stations, buy goods at regular grocery stores and pharmacies, transfer money to their accounts in a state-owned bank, send money to other system users, and buy and sell cryptocurrencies, including the petro introduced by the Venezuelan government. It is likely that those payment records are also kept in the system databases. The system regularly distributes consumer surveys, asking users about their weekly market shopping, household items they own, and other consumption habits.

The government and the ruling party can leverage the information in the system for several purposes. For example, PSUV used the Homeland card to confirm that users voted for Nicolás Maduro in the rigged 2018 presidential election. Local ruling party “street bosses” can access information about the people in their neighborhoods who are

registered in the system, including details about their households and the welfare benefits that they received. Since May 2020, the Homeland system has included a feature called 1x10 del Buen Gobierno (of Good Government), which connects users with government agencies. The 1x10 system is traditionally used to assign electoral mobilization tasks. The leader must ensure that ten others show up to the polling centers to vote for the party. As of May 21, 2024, the government claimed that 4.2 million people were registered in this program. Of note, the domain patria.org.ve, which is managed by the Homeland system, is registered by the ruling PSUV party rather than by a state agency.<sup>199</sup>

Users also must submit their social media profiles if they want to join Patriot Tweeters campaigns, for which they can receive remuneration. The Ministry of Communication uses the Homeland Card to facilitate payments for individuals who meet the weekly tweet targets using the designated daily hashtag. Besides, when users enter the platform, they see recent posts from Maduro's social media accounts on X, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram. They are prompted to follow these accounts and reshare their posts. Users are also recommended to download the Venezuelan messaging app VENapp.

Registered users regularly receive emails and SMS messages from the platform, but the Homeland system lacks messaging capabilities to allow users to communicate with each other directly. The regime, however, developed VENapp to provide direct messaging. Since the beginning of 2022, the Maduro regime has promoted VENapp, which features Telegram-like public channels for spreading information and unencrypted individual-to-individual chats.

At the time of writing, VENapp had over 4.5 million downloads from app stores. The app now includes VenMarket, a section in which users can sell and buy products using an in-app wallet, pay utility bills, check the official exchange rate, and request delivery of food or other products. Likewise, it includes VenMedia, a section featuring informative, educational, and entertainment content. VENapp also boasts features to send geolocalized reports of local incidents, such as broken water lines or subway delays to local authorities in Venezuela. This geolocation capability facilitates the regime's

199 Whois.patria.org.ve, whois information, <https://who.is/whois/patria.org.ve>, accessed May 24, 2024, archived <https://archive.is/6ozvb>.

ability to track any user's location. As such, the app could become a dangerous reporting tool against political activities such as opposition door-to-door campaigning or citizen assemblies. Government and police officers could use geolocation to locate protest participants. In any case, VENapp's user base is growing as the services available have been enhanced since its launch. It could become the Venezuelan equivalent of WeChat, the versatile Chinese app developed by Tencent.

On top of that, video surveillance in many Venezuelan cities poses a threat that has not been sufficiently well-understood by civic actors. The Maduro regime has invested over a billion US dollars in video surveillance and emergency monitoring and its rapid response center. Caracas and many other Venezuelan cities have networked video surveillance cameras in strategic locations, and some official figures indicate a system of more than 30,000 cameras linked to VEN911.<sup>200</sup> An integrated consortium of Chinese companies, e.g., Huawei Technologies, the state-owned China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC), and ZTE developed this system.<sup>201</sup> The video surveillance system likely monitors, tracks, and records protests and other political activities and possibly helps find and track the movements of persons of interest to the security forces. The full capabilities of the installed systems in Venezuela are unknown. There are license plate-recording cameras on the entries and exits to Caracas, and possibly other cities, that law enforcement can use to track vehicle movement; some armored vehicles, as well as mobile command units of the National Police, include camera systems on an extendable pole.

The Huawei-CEIEC consortium has sold systems in other countries under contracts that have included facial recognition capabilities, drones for surveillance, and data integration with geolocation of targets. In 2015, a coalition of Ecuadorian journalists, under the brand Ecuador Transparente, revealed evidence of then-President Rafael Correa's government using the monitoring and rapid response system ECU911 to illegally surveil a wide range of individuals, including politicians across the political spectrum, journalists, and social activists, particularly environmentalists.<sup>202</sup> Video surveillance captured using ECU911 was automatically sent to the National Secretariat of Intelligence monitoring center.<sup>203</sup> It is likely that the system operating in Venezuela works similarly, sending data to the SEBIN in an automated fashion.

The Fake Antenna Detection project<sup>204</sup> registered irregularities from March to May 2019 in how some cell towers worked in Caracas and near the Colombia-Venezuela border, suggesting the possible use of fake antennas, also known as "IMSI catchers," and related devices at both locations.<sup>205</sup> IMSI catchers<sup>206</sup> simulate a cellphone operator's infrastructure to snoop on user's phone calls, SMS messages, and locations of passersby. In the early 2000s, the Venezuelan government acquired Triggerfish devices, a specific type of cellular network catcher or IMSI catcher, from the US company Phoenix Worldwide Industries.<sup>207</sup> The Venezuelan intelligence service's need for mobile cell-phone catchers is mitigated by its already extensive access to intercepted communications, including location, from cell-phone operators, largely without checks or balances. There are, however, cases where intelligence officials would prefer or need more direct and immediate access to information from the equipment they control.

200 "Sobrepeso en equipos para seguridad ciudadana sería de USD 350 millones (USD 350 Million Overpriced in Citizen Security Equipment)," *Transparencia Venezuela*, December 20, 2021, <https://transparenciave.org/sobrepeso-en-equipos-para-seguridad-ciudadana-seria-de-usd-350-millones/>.

201 "Sistemas de Videovigilancia y Atención de Emergencias en Venezuela (Video Surveillance Systems and Emergency Services in Venezuela)," *Transparencia Venezuela*, April 2022, <https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Sistemas-de-videovigilancia-y-atencion%CC%81n-de-emergencias-en-Venezuela.pdf>.

202 For more information, see "Freedom on the Net 2016," Ecuador chap., *Freedom House website*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ecuador/freedom-net/2016>.

203 See "Freedom on the Net 2017, Ecuador chap., *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ecuador/freedom-net/2017>.

204 South Lighthouse, Fake Antenna Detention Project, <https://fadeproject.org/>.

205 South Lighthouse, Fake Antenna Detention Project. For more on irregularities found in Caracas and along the Colombia-Venezuela border, see, respectively, <https://fadeproject.org/?project=caracas>; and <https://fadeproject.org/?project=venezuelan-colombian-border>.

206 IMSI is short for international mobile subscriber identity, which comprises a unique numerical identifier for all users of a given cellular network. For more, see: "What Is IMSI Number?," *IMEI.org*, <https://imei.org/blog/imsi-number>.

207 Isabel Guerrero, "En estos puntos rojos tu celular es un libro abierto (In These Red Dots Your Cell Phone Is an Open Book)," *Armando.info*, September 6, 2020, <https://armando.info/en-estos-puntos-rojos-tu-celular-es-un-libro-abierto/>.



## Social media and internet traffic monitoring

For years, civil society organizations have documented reprisals and persecution against private citizens for their online speech. On the main state-owned TV channel, vice president of the governing party Cabello frequently highlights tweets and online messages from journalists and dissidents, chastising the authors in a dedicated section of his show, *Con el Mazo Dando*. Those mentioned are often subsequently harassed or persecuted by both state and nonstate actors.

In an iconic case from 2018, aviation aficionado Pedro Jaimes Criollo was detained, held incommunicado, tortured, and charged for tweeting publicly available information about the Venezuelan presidential plane from a flight-tracking website.<sup>208</sup> He was finally declared innocent in 2021.

In 2022, Venezuelan authorities detained Olga Mata, a seventy-two-year-old TikTok user, and charged her with hate crimes after she uploaded a satirical video that mocked Maduro and Attorney General Tarek William Saab.<sup>209</sup>

Statuses and avatars on messaging app WhatsApp are also surveilled. This points to excessive and unjustified monitoring as well possible organized channels for informers to provide tips about common citizen discontent. Authorities detained at least nine people in 2020 for criticizing the way in which the government was handling the pandemic via WhatsApp statuses or in private chats; six of those people were charged with hate crimes.<sup>210</sup> For example, in June 2022, the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) detained Yohn Alejandro Noguera

hours after he criticized both the GNB and his local municipality on WhatsApp. He was later charged with “instigation of hate.”<sup>211</sup>

In addition to the surveillance of social media and internet platforms, there is an elevated risk of monitoring lower-level internet traffic, such as which websites and apps users visit and, occasionally, what they do on them.

VE sin Filtro’s research revealed the use of middleboxes<sup>212</sup> in internet censorship and sophisticated network traffic manipulation in Venezuela, including man-in-the-middle attacks, in which an unknown and covert middle party monitors and potentially alters communication unknowingly between two end users. These techniques are used for targeted and mass surveillance of internet traffic.<sup>213</sup>

## Wiretapping and interception of communications

In a significant revelation of the scale of the surveillance apparatus in Venezuela,<sup>214</sup> Telefónica, the Madrid-based parent company of mobile network operator and market leader Movistar Venezuela, released a transparency report that detailed the indiscriminate mass interception of private communications of its Venezuelan subscribers at the order of government security agencies. According to the company, in 2021, Telefónica intercepted the communications of over 1.5 million subscribers in Venezuela, comprising more than 20 percent of Movistar telephone and internet lines. Telefónica carried out these interventions at the order of the Maduro regime; these interventions included intercepting or

208 Tamara Taraciuk Broner, “Held Incommunicado for Tweeting in Venezuela,” Human Rights Watch, June 11, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/11/held-incommunicado-tweeting-venezuela>.

209 María Luisa Paúl, “A Woman’s TikTok Video Mocked Venezuelan Politicians. She Was Arrested,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/04/19/tiktok-venezuela-arrested-free-speech-censorship-nicolas-maduro/>.

210 “Van nueve detenidos por mensajes de Whatsapp durante cuarentena (Nine Arrested for WhatsApp Messages during Quarantine),” *La Nación*, Junio 11, 2020, <https://lanacionweb.com/nacional/van-nueve-detenidos-por-mensajes-de-whatsapp-durante-cuarentena/>.

211 “GNB detuvo a un ciudadano en Anzoátegui por publicar críticas en estados de WhatsApp (GNB Detained a Citizen in Anzoátegui for Posting Criticisms in WhatsApp Statuses),” Espacio Público, Junio 13, 2022, <https://espaciopublico.org/gnb-detuvo-a-ciudadano-por-criticas-en-estados-de-whatsapp/>.

212 The commonly accepted definition of a middlebox is “a networking device that transforms, inspects, filters, or manipulates traffic for purposes other than providing a path for data exchange between a source host and a destination host.” (Among others using this definition is the Open Observatory of Network Interference [OONI] Glossary.) There are many legitimate middleboxes, but there are also illegitimate or harmful uses of middleboxes. For instance, deep packet inspection for surveillance or censorship, middleboxes to intercept and modify network traffic, redirecting users to malicious websites, or injecting malware. For detailed information on middleboxes, see Network Working Group, “Middleboxes: Taxonomy and Issues,” Memo, 2002, <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/rfc3234>.

213 Andrés Azpúrua and Carlos Guerra, “Phishing by Venezuelan Government Puts Activists and Internet Users at Risk,” VE sin Filtro, February 15, 2019, [https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/Phishing\\_by\\_Venezuelan\\_government\\_targets\\_activists/](https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/Phishing_by_Venezuelan_government_targets_activists/).

214 “Maduro Administration Is Spying on Venezuelans at a Massive Scale,” VE sin Filtro, June 22, 2022, <https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/venezuela-communications-spying/>.

“tapping” calls, monitoring text messages, pulling location information as recorded by cellphone towers, or watching users’ internet traffic. Interventions in other countries in the region included in the transparency report were all under 1 percent of the subscribers. It is unclear what proportion of the 20 percent of Movistar subscriber lines that were affected by interceptions also had their internet traffic monitored or analyzed at the government’s request.<sup>215</sup>

The Telefónica report matched multiple reported cases, including one documented in VE sin Filtro’s 2021 report titled “Without Rights in #InternetVE” (“Sin derechos en #InternetVE”), which highlighted the case of a Venezuelan human rights organization that was subject to the unauthorized access of its WhatsApp account. The evidence in the case pointed toward the facilitation and interception of SMS messages by their mobile service provider, but more sophisticated attacks could not be entirely ruled out. In recent years, VE sin Filtro has uncovered other cases of journalists and civil society actors whose communications have likely been subject to surveillance.<sup>216</sup>

The Venezuelan law on communications (Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones) protects the privacy of communications, including a mandate that telecommunications interception requests can only be undertaken after prosecutors obtain court approval in pursuit of a criminal investigation. This limitation, however, is clearly not being followed, as the vast number of intercepted lines is only compatible with systematic abuse. Civil society activists have noted how, since 2011, journalists’ and politicians’ private calls are commonly recorded and subsequently broadcast on state-owned media. More significantly, it is now routine to hear edited or manipulated recordings designed to incriminate or embarrass those in the recordings.

Data from other telephone operators and internet service providers (ISPs) are unknown because they do not publish transparency reports. It is worth noting that Telefónica, as a Spanish company, is subject to European regulations for the protection of personal data and transparency.

The rate of subscriber lines intercepted by other private Venezuelan telecom providers could likely be higher, and surveillance is likely significantly worse for those using state-owned companies. Additionally, a large share of the information collected through surveillance is the geolocation of phones. Security forces could use this data to track the location of targets, determine who was present at a specific event, or identify who met with whom.

The use of commercial spyware has not been verified in specific cases in Venezuela. However, the amount of information on the phone communications of Venezuelan activists and politicians that PSUV officials have shown on different occasions suggests that they have access to private communications. Some of the interviewed suggested that a massive telephone communications monitoring system could operate in Venezuela, making commercial spyware unnecessary. Operating a phone communications monitoring system on the government-run landline provider CANTV or mobile provider Movilnet would be technically trivial, and no accountability controls exist to prevent it.

## Unauthorized state access to information stored on digital devices

Sensitive materials, data, and conversations on digital devices, such as smartphones, computers, and cameras, are frequently at risk of being accessed by the Maduro regime’s security forces. Often security forces compel journalists, activists, and citizens to delete videos or pictures of demonstrations, repression by state actors, or other incidents in which regime abuse is evident.

Espacio Público documented over thirty-one cases in thirteen states of Venezuela between January 2020 and August 2021, targeting primarily journalists, including eighteen instances of illegal device confiscations and thirteen attempts to check device contents under threat or while using violence.<sup>217</sup>

In addition, forensic analysis has demonstrated evidence of data extraction from laptops and cellphones of detained journalists whose devices

215 “Informe de Transparencia en las Comunicaciones 2021,” Telefónica, June 18, 2022, <https://www.telefonica.com/es/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/08/Informe-de-Transparencia-en-las-Comunicaciones-2021.pdf>.

216 “#Informe2021: Derechos digitales, censura y conectividad en Venezuela (#Report2021: Digital Rights, Censorship and Connectivity in Venezuela),” VE sin Filtro, April 6, 2022, [https://vesinfiltr.com/noticias/2021\\_informe\\_anual/](https://vesinfiltr.com/noticias/2021_informe_anual/).

217 “Revisión ilegal de equipos: Lo que debes saber y hacer (Illegal Equipment Checks: What You Should Know and Do),” Espacio Público, December 16, 2021. <https://espaciopublico.org/revision-ilegal-de-equipos-lo-que-debes-saber-y-hacer>.

were in the custody of prosecutors and criminal investigators. At-risk individuals should assume that, in the event of detention, any devices they have on their persons, and possibly devices at their home or office, will be forensically examined and that data will be extracted from them at the time of a legal or illegal detention. Venezuelan authorities have acquired Israel's Cellebrite UFED Touch units over the years, despite sanctions.<sup>218</sup> These devices are used to hack locked cellphones and extract data from them. Venezuelan authorities, including the DGCIM, are known to use them.<sup>219</sup> At-risk individuals should also expect that the security forces will force detainees to provide passwords for accessing devices or online services, through coercion, threats of harming family members, or physical torture, as has been reported for several individuals who have previously been arbitrarily detained.

## State-sponsored phishing

Venezuelan state actors have undertaken phishing attacks against journalists, opposition politicians, and civil society actors for years. These attacks are designed to obtain personal information from internet users unaware that they are targets. The sensitive information that people might inadvertently share with the Maduro regime includes usernames, passwords, national ID numbers, or political affiliation.

In 2019, VE sin Filtro also uncovered two massive state-sponsored phishing operations, directed against Venezuelan dissidents. On both occasions, threat actors targeted users of websites related to the Venezuelan opposition and forms on those sites used to gather information about users. These attacks used sophisticated equipment to inspect all of the traffic of CANTV users, comprising over 70 percent of residential internet connections, and manipulate the internet traffic to take them to a fake replica of the intended site. Subsequently, VE

sin Filtro identified a series of malicious websites that included the Venezuelan top-level domain (i.e., “.ve”) in their URLs. These sites were all hosted on the same server used in another phishing operation attributed to Venezuelan state actors.<sup>220</sup>

The first of these cases was an attack that targeted voluntariosxvenezuela.com, a website operated by the Venezuelan opposition, which was at the time led by then-National Assembly President Guaidó. The original website “was created to register volunteers interested in helping with the distribution of humanitarian aid,”<sup>221</sup> while the replica website facilitated the regime's data collection of those intending to register with the opposition. On February 12, 2019, VE sin Filtro detected that CANTV “was redirecting users visiting the website to another server hosting a visually identical malicious website which [was] not owned or controlled by the legitimate site administrators of voluntariosxvenezuela.com,”<sup>222</sup> and that “[a]s a result, thanks to the scope and number of people mobilized through the [humanitarian aid] campaign, and the percentage of internet traffic that passes through CANTV networks, [VE sin Filtro estimates] that tens of thousands of people submitted their data to the malicious cloned website.”<sup>223</sup>

A second, similar incident happened in 2020. Guaidó's interim administration created the “Héroes de la Salud” platform to provide financial assistance to healthcare workers in Venezuela, who were facing difficult working conditions at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic alongside the persistently low wages of those working in the public sector. On March 26, 2020, when CANTV deceived its users with injected malicious DNS responses for the websites heroesdesaludve.info and saludvzla.com, sending users who wanted to visit the sites to fake replicas to capture their data. It is possible that the malicious sites also received visitors from deceived users after clicking on malicious links.<sup>224</sup>

218 Oded Yaron, “Despite Sanctions, Israeli Firm Cellebrite Sold Phone-hacking Tech to Venezuela,” *Haaretz*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/tech-news/2020-09-10/ty-article/.premium/despite-sanctions-israeli-firm-sold-phone-hacking-tech-to-venezuela/0000017f-f355-df98-a5ff-f3fdb8c0000>.

219 Cazadores de Fake News (@cazamosfakenews), “#CellebriteVenezuela | el pasado mes de mayo, @Cellebrite\_UFED, empresa israelí que produce un software capaz de hackear celulares y, #NEGÓ haber vendido el sistema al régimen Venezolano,” Twitter video, October 29, 2021, [https://twitter.com/cazamosfakenews/status/1454212859819343876?s=20&t=6et\\_Wh6Q50qgfK9HXT3\\_8A](https://twitter.com/cazamosfakenews/status/1454212859819343876?s=20&t=6et_Wh6Q50qgfK9HXT3_8A).

220 Andrés Azpúrua and Carlos Guerra, “Phishing by Venezuelan Government Puts Activists and Internet Users at Risk,” VE sin Filtro, February 15, 2019, [https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/Phishing\\_by\\_Venezuelan\\_government\\_targets\\_activists/](https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/Phishing_by_Venezuelan_government_targets_activists/).

221 Azpúrua and Guerra, “Phishing by Venezuelan Government.”

222 Azpúrua and Guerra, “Phishing by Venezuelan Government.”

223 Azpúrua and Guerra, “Phishing by Venezuelan Government.”

224 VE sin Filtro, “State-sponsored Phishing against Healthcare Workers amid COVID-19 Pandemic in Venezuela,” April 27, 2020, [https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2020-04-26-phishing\\_healthcare\\_heroes](https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2020-04-26-phishing_healthcare_heroes).

# Access to internet in Venezuela

Venezuela went from having one of the most vibrant telecommunications markets compared to the rest of Latin America in the first decade of the century to having one of the worst internet services in the world in the last decade. Access to the internet is limited by infrastructure decay, lack of affordability, and technical censorship—all obstacles posed by the authoritarian regime in order to limit access to information, curtail freedom of expression, and hinder political organizing.

In this section, the report dives into granular data about internet penetration, connectivity offerings and speed, technical censorship including attacks on servers, internet shutdowns, and network outages.

## Internet penetration

At the start of 2024, Venezuela had a 61.6 percent internet penetration rate, which is lower than the 82.6 percent average for South America, according to the penetration rates published by Kepios.<sup>225</sup> The internet penetration rate has fluctuated, having recovered some in 2021, when it reached 62.25 percent by the third quarter, but declining in the last quarter of 2022 to 55.34 percent, according to data published by CONATEL.<sup>226</sup>

There is also a digital gap between rural and urban states. The states with the highest penetration rates have higher population density. The ten states with the lowest levels of penetration are Amazonas,

Delta Amacuro, Apure, Sucre, Yaracuy, Guárico, Falcón, Trujillo, Monagas, and Portuguesa.<sup>227</sup>

## Internet speed

In Venezuela, the median fixed (as opposed to mobile) internet speed is 16.5 megabits per second (Mbps) for download,<sup>228</sup> the second slowest in Latin America. It ranks behind Cuba, with 1.84 Mbps for download,<sup>229</sup> according to network testing company Ookla's Speedtest Global Index (as of January 2023). Venezuela ranks 138 out of the 179 countries included in Ookla's sample.<sup>230</sup>

The open internet measurement project called M-Lab,<sup>231</sup> shows a median download speed of 2.4 Mbps and an upload speed of 4.29 Mbps. According to measurements conducted using M-Lab's Network Diagnostics Tool, at least 59 percent of internet users in Venezuela continue to have insufficient broadband connections, which limits or prevents Venezuelan users from fully developing certain activities. Common activities like sending and receiving emails do not require a great deal of broadband, but watching videos and participating in high-quality video calls typically require a minimum of around 5 Mbps, such as is needed, for example, to see the text on a chalkboard clearly in a video.<sup>232</sup>

## Internet service offerings

Although the range of internet service packages offered in Venezuela has improved in recent years, there is still a large demand to be met. An analysis of the service packages of twenty-four national ISPs

225 "Reports—Global Digital Insights 2024," DataReportal, Kepios, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports>.

226 "Sin derechos en #INTERNETVE (Without Rights in #InternetVE)," VE sin Filtro, September 15, 2023, <https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2022-2023/>.

227 "Informe cifras del sector primer trimestre 2022," CONATEL.

228 "Venezuela Median Country Speeds," Speedtest, Ookla, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/venezuela>.

229 "Cuba Median Country Speeds," Speedtest, Ookla, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/cuba>.

230 "Speedtest Global Index," Speedtest, Ookla, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/>.

231 "Open Internet Measurement," Measurement Lab, last accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.measurementlab.net/about/>.

232 See also Tyler Cooper, "What Is a Good Internet Speed?," BroadbandNow, August 28, 2020, <https://broadbandnow.com/guides/how-much-internet-speed-do-i-need>; Peter Christiansen, "How Much Speed Do I Need to Stream Video?" HighSpeedInternet.com, November 29, 2022, <https://www.highspeedinternet.com/resources/how-much-speed-do-i-need-to-watch-netflix-and-hulu>; and Aleksander Hougen, "What Is a Good Internet Speed in 2023 for Browsing, Streaming & Online Gaming?," Cloudwards, November 14, 2022, <https://www.cloudwards.net/good-internet-speed>.

highlights the elevated cost of the services, which stands as an obstacle to access for Venezuelans. Comparing the price of their 119 plans and the Venezuelan minimum wage shows an extreme range of prices, from 0.08 to 56.22 times the minimum monthly wage, or from US\$0.41 (for a small metered cellular data plan) to US\$300. The median price for the surveyed internet packages was 6.55 times the minimum monthly wage; while this did not reflect average expenses in internet access, it shows how much of the market focuses on the higher end, leaving few affordable options for those at or just above the minimum monthly wage.

The unequal distribution of the plan offerings in the different states and territories of the country is also noteworthy: while half of all ISPs offer services in Caracas, most places do not have many options, if any. ISPs show greater expansion of their packages in Caracas and other major cities in which the return on investment is viable. However, coverage by private operators is very low in rural, remote, or low-population-density areas.<sup>233</sup> Miranda has the second highest service offers with eight ISPs, followed by Zulia (six) and Carabobo (five). The president of the Chamber of Telecommunications Services, Pedro Marín, explained that one of the reasons why most ISPs serve only a few major cities—mainly Caracas, Maracaibo, Barquisimeto, and Valencia—is the high cost of using general telecommunications routes, physical infrastructure owned and managed by state-owned companies.<sup>234</sup> In some border states, citizens use wireless services from a neighboring country to access the internet. Journalist William Peña stated that some ISPs hire upstream providers from nearby border countries to reduce costs and offer better bandwidth or lower prices,<sup>235</sup> such as those on offer in Zulia that connect to the internet through Colombian providers.

Fiber optic service finally entered the market in 2022.<sup>236</sup> It is offered by the country's main ISPs—CANTV, Inter, NetUno, and Supercable—as well as other smaller ISPs. Fifteen states (Anzoátegui, Aragua, Barinas, Carabobo, Distrito Capital, Falcón, La Guaira, Lara, Mérida, Miranda, Monagas, Nueva Esparta, Táchira, Trujillo, and Zulia) have at least one fiber optic provider, but none cover the entire area of their respective state. The availability of fiber optic is concentrated in the most urban areas with the most purchasing power.

## Internet censorship

Similar to other autocratic governments, the Maduro regime blocks websites as a means of censoring and controlling access to information. DFRLab research partner VE sin Filtro identified different types of blocks in Venezuela, including DNS, HTTP/HTTPS, and TCP/IP blocks.<sup>237</sup> Each type of block affects user connections differently, some of them being more effective or difficult to bypass. In a vast majority of cases, private ISPs used DNS blocks. State-run CANTV often alternatively uses HTTP/HTTPS blocks and DNS blocks.

According to analysis conducted by VE sin Filtro, over one hundred URLs are blocked in Venezuela in some form, including separate blocks on different pages within individual websites. These URLs belonged to eighty-six websites, fifty-two of which were news sites, including nearly all of the most well-known independent Venezuelan news outlets. Some media outlets have created alternative domains in Venezuela to avoid the online censorship that targets their primary domains. These outlets have chosen to register new web domains and house them on servers outside the country in an attempt to avoid censorship. It is, however, a game of cat and mouse, as ISPs

233 Mairena Nieves Arvelaiz, “El servicio de internet en Venezuela: una mirada desde las políticas públicas (Internet Service in Venezuela: A Public Policy Perspective),” *Debates IESA* (magazine), Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, January 10, 2021, <http://www.debatesiesa.com/el-servicio-de-internet-en-venezuela-una-mirada-desde-las-politicas-publicas/>.

234 Zulvyn Díaz, “Deficiencias de Cantv dan paso al internet de fibra óptica en zonas populares de Caracas (Cantv’s Deficiencies Give Way to Fiber Optic Internet in Popular Areas of Caracas),” *TalCual*, January 27, 2023, <https://talcualdigital.com/fallas-de-cantv-dieron-paso-al-internet-de-fibra-optica-en-zonas-populares-de-caracas/>.

235 Venezuela Inteligente, interview with William Peña, March 1, 2023.

236 “Cantv: Internet por fibra óptica cuesta hasta \$100 y lo solicitas por Telegram (pasos) [CANTV: Fiber Optic Internet Costs up to \$100 and You Request it via Telegram (Steps)],” *El Interés*, September 17, 2022, <https://elestimulo.com/elinteres/tu-bolsillo/2022-09-17/cantv-internet-por-fibra-optica-cuesta-hasta-100-y-lo-solicitas-por-telegram-pasos/>.

237 In a DNS block, the ISP reconfigures Domain Name System (DNS) servers, causing incorrect responses to requests for the domains. This technique is relatively simple and does not pose a cost to the internet operators that execute them. Users may bypass this type of blocking by changing DNS servers. Meanwhile, HTTP and HTTPS blocks involve a process known as “deep packet inspection,” examining multiple elements (e.g., the website hostname, the requested URL, keywords in the body of the website, the server name indication, etc.). As a result, the HTTP/HTTPS block implemented by CANTV requires use of a VPN to get around the censorship. For a broader overview of blockage types and how to circumvent them, see “Understanding and Circumventing Network Censorship,” *Surveillance Self-Defense*, April 24, 2020, <https://ssd.eff.org/module/understanding-and-circumventing-network-censorship>.

**Table 8.** Table showing the number of blocked websites by category (e-commerce, economics, hate speech, human rights, media sharing, news media, political commentary, pornography, public health, and anonymization and circumvention tools), along with the total number of blocked websites under each category, the number blocked URLs (as separate from websites, which might comprise multiple URLs), and total events (including the different blocks applied or reapplied by each ISP) registered in May 2024.

Category	CATEGORY	Cases: Blocked websites	Blocked URLs or domains	Total blocking events
E-commerce	COMM	1	4	23
Economics	ECON	2	4	22
Hate speech	HATE	2	2	9
Human rights issues	HUMR	5	6	26
Media sharing	MMED	3	3	13
News media	NEWS	52	77	367
Political criticism	POLR	14	16	70
Pornography	PORN	2	2	2
Public health	PUBH	2	2	8
Anonymization and circumvention tools	ANON	3	5	26
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>86</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>566</b>

Source: Ve sin Filtro-generated graph.

frequently block the new domains in short order.<sup>238</sup> This tendency poses a critical obstacle to freedom of expression and information. On September 7, 2023, major internet providers in Venezuela blocked the website [www.buscadorprimaria2023.com](http://www.buscadorprimaria2023.com), which enabled citizens to check their polling location for the opposition primaries. The DNS-type block was still active in Digitel, Inter, Supercable, and the state-owned CANTV after the primary election on October 22, 2023. Movistar also applied a block to the voting center search engine for the primary, but it was of the HTTPS/HTTP type.

The blocks have extended beyond news media censorship and are also applied against sites dedicated to political commentary and human rights issues. All of the ISPs examined, including both public and private, have applied internet blocks. Several organizations have been the victims of blocks over the years. There are currently five active blocks of nongovernmental organization webpages.

VE sin Filtro determined that the website [www.jpvenezuela.com](http://www.jpvenezuela.com), which belongs to the

nongovernmental organization Justicia, Encuentro, y Perdón (Justice, Reunion, and Forgiveness), was blocked at the time of writing. This organization demands reparations for the more than 200 Venezuelans killed while demonstrating against the regime in 2014 and 2017. The organization also reports on the torture and cruel and inhumane treatment of political prisoners in Venezuelan detention centers. According to technical measurements taken by VE sin Filtro, the organization's site has been blocked for CANTV customers since at least June 6, 2022.

VE sin Filtro also confirmed that CANTV blocked the advocacy platform Change.org through the weekend of February 22, 2019, likely linked to petitions for Venezuela-related causes. The most popular petition at the time was one asking the regime to allow humanitarian aid to enter the country. The second most popular petition was one requesting an official visit from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet. A third petition, appearing shortly

<sup>238</sup> See the appendixes for a listing of tables of blockades, by category, for a complete list of blocked websites in Venezuela.

before the block, expressed support for a military intervention to overthrow the Maduro regime.<sup>239</sup>

Unilateral website blocks do not align with international human rights standards. They are ordered *ex officio* at the discretion of the telecommunication's regulatory agency, CONATEL, in complete opacity, and without a specific legal basis. These orders for internet blocks lack due process and are never overseen or dictated by a judge, which also takes away the rights of self-defense from any of the affected website's owners.

The government restriction of access to information includes limiting access to VPNs and other censorship circumvention tools. For instance, the VPN Tunnel Bear's homepage was blocked at the time of writing, and there was also an attempt to alter the functionality of the app by blocking its API. Psiphon, another VPN, has been blocked in Venezuela. These tools were still blocked as of May 2, 2024. VE sin Filtro observed CANTV attempts to block Tor—the privacy-focused web browser and the relay network it uses can be used to get around blocks, obfuscate internet traffic, and hide its origin—in 2018 and 2019.<sup>240</sup>

Blocks not only affect citizens' freedom of information in Venezuela, but they also stand as obstacles to education and access to quality information and to the right to freedom of association. In 2019, the Maduro regime ordered the block of Wikipedia<sup>241</sup> for multiple days after an article on the website mentioned that Guaidó was the constitutional interim president of Venezuela. Venezuela is the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has totally blocked Wikipedia. The other countries that have completely blocked Wikipedia are China (2004, 2005–2008, 2015–2018, and 2019 to the time of writing), Myanmar (2021 to the time of writing), Pakistan (three days in February 2023), Tunisia (four days in November

2006), Turkey (April 2017 to January 2020), and Uzbekistan (for a few days in 2007, 2008, and 2012).

After Wikipedia's block in Venezuela, Oscar Costero, an activist for free access to knowledge and digital rights, was the victim of online harassment and judicial persecution in retaliation for his Wikimedia work. In 2019, a fringe website labeled Costero and other Venezuelan Wikipedia volunteers as "Wikipedia blackmailers." In 2022, the Venezuelan police detained and questioned Costero when he attempted to renew his passport. During the interrogation, a police officer informed him that there was an open investigation against him, as well as against Wikimedia Venezuela, for "incitement to hatred" and "legitimation of illicit capitals." Costero's passport was retained, and he was prohibited from leaving the country.

Attacks on digital infrastructure such as web servers is another common threat against organizations in Venezuela. One of the most common forms of attack is a denial of service (DoS) attack<sup>242</sup> against a target website, in this case often those of media organizations.<sup>243</sup> In a DoS attack, a malicious actor generates an extreme volume of traffic for the targeted web server until it is unable to respond to genuine website requests from other users, due to the overwhelming volume of traffic requests. DoS attacks have been reported by many media organizations and usually coincide with a breaking news story whose content makes it a quash candidate for the Maduro regime or related business interests. If threat actors behind an attack manage to cripple or completely disable a web server while a new or potentially viral story is in the spotlight, the impact of the reporting will be diminished.

## Internet shutdowns

There is a significant risk of internet shutdowns in the country. The Internet Society Pulse Shutdowns Tracker estimates that Venezuela is among the ten countries most likely to experience an internet

239 VE sin Filtro (@vesinfiltrro), "CONFIRMED: #Venezuela blocking @Change.org on state ISP #CANTV using #SNIfiltering Probably motivated by <http://change.org> petition requesting military intervention. #internetVE #keepItOn," Twitter photo, February 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltrro/status/1101232119194546176>.

240 "CANTV bloquea la red Tor, usada para evadir bloqueos y proteger la privacidad (CANTV Blocks Tor Network, Used to Evade Blockades and Protect Privacy)," VE sin Filtro, June 26, 2018, [https://vesinfiltrro.com/noticias/CANTV\\_bloquea\\_Tor\\_2017-06-26/](https://vesinfiltrro.com/noticias/CANTV_bloquea_Tor_2017-06-26/).

241 Andrés Azpúrua et al., "From the Blocking of Wikipedia to Social Media: Venezuela's Political Crisis," VE sin Filtro, IPYS Venezuela, OONI, and DFRLab, January 29, 2019, <https://vesinfiltrro.com/noticias/report-jan-2019/>.

242 "What Is a Denial of Service (DoS) Attack?," Microsoft, November 24, 2022, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365-life-hacks/privacy-and-safety/what-is-denial-of-service-attack>.

243 C. Julián, "Ataques DDoS, un mecanismo de censura a medios de comunicación (DDoS Attacks, a Mechanism for Media Censorship)," *El Diario*, July 27, 2020, <https://eldiario.com/2020/07/27/ataques-ddos-un-mecanismo-de-censura-a-medios-de-comunicacion/>.

shutdown in 2024.<sup>244</sup> This risk would likely be higher around the July 28 election or if the country were to see renewed protests credibly challenging the Maduro regime.

Internet shutdowns are a growing threat to the exercise of human rights around the world. An overreaching measure increasingly popular in autocracies, a shutdown is intentionally cutting off internet access within a country or degrading connections until they cease to be usable for communicating. Internet shutdowns are the most drastic action authorities can take to control communication and access to information in a country, creating a dramatic restriction to human rights that likely exacerbates or covers up offline rights violations occurring at the time of the shutdowns. Network shutdowns are deliberate and typically begin at key moments when officials need to control access to information and communication among people. In these cases, governments may be willing to assume such high political cost in order to stifle dissent or limit opposition activities. These shutdowns stand in contrast to frequent internet service outages, which occur as a result of infrastructure failures, though lack of investment or maintenance may be the result of public policy. There have been a few internet shutdowns in Venezuela in recent years.

On the night of the Venezuelan presidential election of April 14, 2013, while Venezuelans were waiting for the election results, the government of then-Interim President Maduro shut down access to the internet.<sup>245</sup> The government claimed that

the shutdown lasted for four minutes, but users reported not having internet access for around twenty minutes.<sup>246</sup> The shutdown affected users of the state-owned telecommunications company CANTV, which dominated the internet market share at 87.3 percent in 2013.<sup>247</sup> Government officials publicly acknowledged the shutdown, claiming without providing any evidence that it was necessary to prevent what they described both as a hacking attempt<sup>248</sup> and a DoS attack<sup>249</sup> against servers of the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, or CNE). After this incident, the CNE website blocked any attempts to connect coming from outside of Venezuela, making it impossible for people abroad to look at the vote count.

Later, an internet shutdown that lasted between thirty-six hours and seventy-two hours occurred in the Andean state of Táchira in early 2014.<sup>250</sup> It coincided with especially intense protests in the state after Maduro announced that “he would go at it with everything” to repress discontent in Táchira.

In 2019, VE sin Filtro documented twelve social media shutdowns, during which multiple social media platforms suffered simultaneous blocks (as opposed to a full internet shutdown) affecting CANTV customers,<sup>251</sup> followed by another two in 2020,<sup>252</sup> in which the ISP blocked multiple social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Periscope simultaneously. These blocks seemed to be carefully timed and highly targeted with the likely intention to stop live news coverage of events such as protests and Guaidó’s speeches.

244 Internet Society Pulse (platform), “Internet Shutdowns Trackers,” Presentation, Freedom Online Coalition Task Force on Internet Shutdowns, April 16, 2024.

245 “Gobierno nacional interrumpió temporalmente servicio de internet y bloqueó acceso desde el exterior a página web del Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Government Temporarily Interrupted Internet Service and Blocked Access from Abroad to the National Electoral Council’s Website),” IPYS Venezuela, May 29, 2013, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/gobierno-nacional-interrupcio-temporalmente-servicio-de-internet-y-bloqueo-acceso-desde-el-exterior-a-pagina-web-del-consejo-nacional-electoral/>.

246 Marianne Díaz Hernández, “Venezuela: Internet Blocked for ‘Three Minutes’ on Election Day,” AdVox, project of Global Voices network, April 15, 2013, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2013/04/15/venezuela-internet-blocked-for-three-minutes-on-election-da/>.

247 “Venezuela’s Cantv Doubles Profits in 2013,” Business News Americas (Bnamericas), March 13, 2014, <https://www.bnamericas.com/en/news/venezuelas-cantv-doubles-profits-in-2013>.

248 Jorge Arreaza M (@jaarreaza), “Compatriotas no hay problemas con internet. Calma!! Fue una maniobra breve para impedir más hackeos conspiradores del exterior,” Twitter post, April 14, 2013, <https://twitter.com/jaarreaza/status/323572162332090369>.

249 “Jorge Arreaza: suspensión momentánea de Internet se hizo para proteger a la página web del CNE de ataques,” ALBA Ciudad 96.3 FM, April 14, 2013, <https://albacidad.org/2013/04/video-jorge-arreaza-suspension-momentanea-de-internet-se-hizo-para-proteger-a-la-pagina-web-del-cne-de-ataques/>.

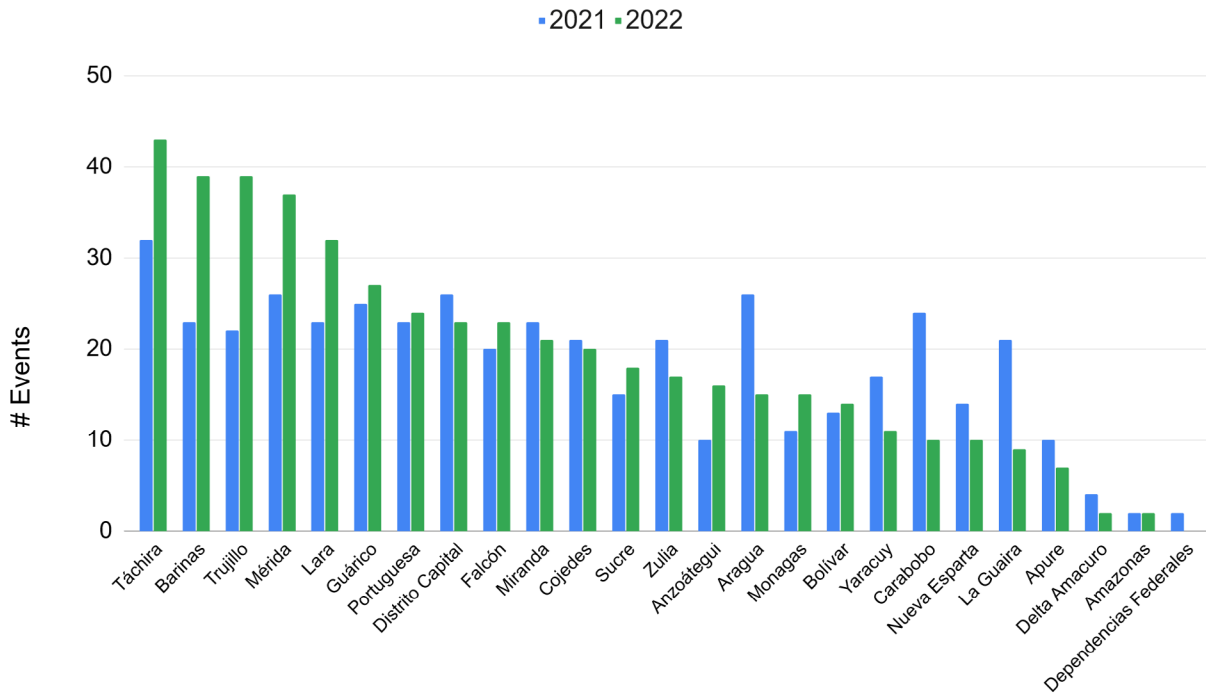
250 Marianne Díaz, “Venezuela: The Internet Goes Dark in Táchira,” AdVox, Global Voices, February 22, 2014, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2014/02/22/blackout-in-venezuela-the-internet-goes-dark-in-tachira-censorship-access/>.

251 *Targeted, Cut Off, and Left in the Dark: The #KeepItOn Report on Internet Shutdowns in 2019*, Access Now, February 2020, <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KeepItOn-2019-report-1.pdf>.

252 “Bloquean redes sociales durante elección de directiva de la AN (Social Media Are Blocked during the Election of the AN’s Board of Directors),” VE sin Filtro, January 5, 2020, <https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/alerta-2020-01-05/>.



Figure 4. Connectivity Events



Source: Ve sin Filtro-generated graph.

According to the #KeepItOn coalition—which includes more than 300 organizations from 105 countries, advocates for internet access, and monitors internet disruptions in more than a hundred countries—Venezuelan authorities have returned to “old patterns” of internet shutdowns. For example, there were internet service disruptions in Caracas during the October 2023 primaries. Although the regime attributed these events to power outages, the #KeepItOn report indicated that “the timing aligns with patterns of past disruptions, and the government has since taken repeated steps to undermine the election process.”<sup>253</sup>

### Network outages

Internet connectivity in Venezuela can be described as intermittent. Outages and connectivity interruptions occur regularly, leaving large swaths of

the country offline. Similarly, for many years political calculations—at the broader public’s expense—prevented the adjustment of rates in response to high inflation and hyperinflation. This in turn led to underinvestment and a lack of maintenance and resources for meeting demand. The results are unreliable, low-quality services and the loss of human capital in industry. The internet outages, or more generally incidents of disruption, can come from technical problems at an ISP or broader infrastructure issues like a power blackout.

In 2021, VE sin Filtro documented 454 regional events.<sup>254</sup> “Thirty-two of these events affected the state of Táchira, while Mérida, Aragua, and the Capital District presented 26 events each.”<sup>255</sup> In 2022, VE sin Filtro documented 474 regional events.<sup>256</sup> Táchira was the most affected state, with forty-three events, followed by thirty-nine events in

253 Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, and Carolyn Tackett, *Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence. Internet Shutdowns in 2023*, Access Now, May 2024, <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf>.

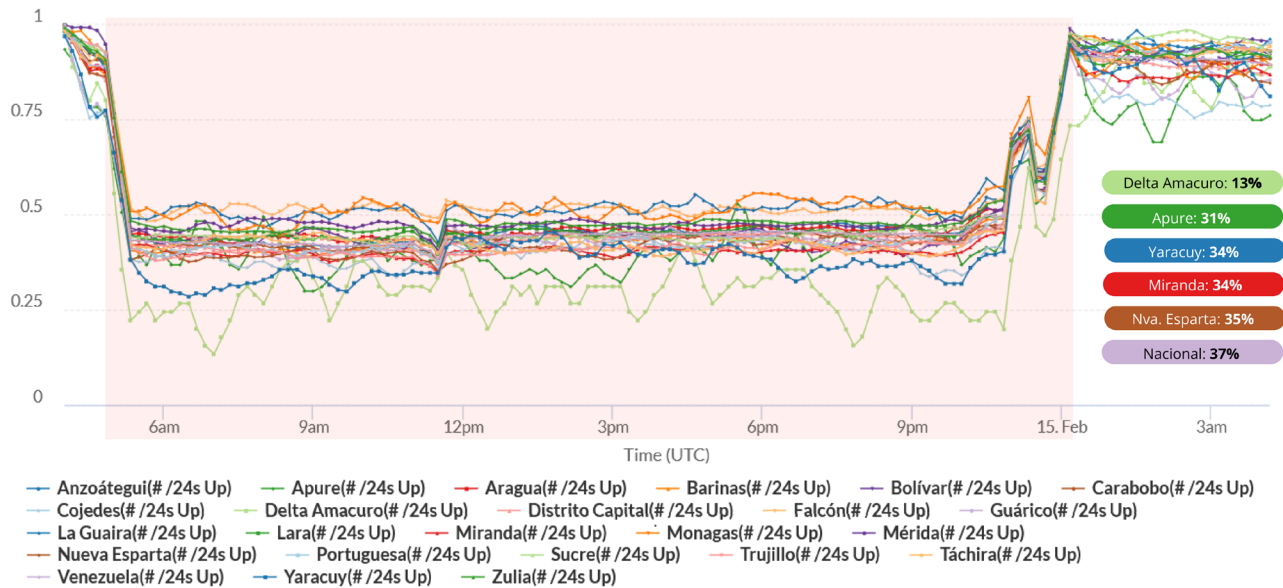
254 “Sin Derechos en #InternetVE Reporte 2021: Bloqueos, censura, conectividad, ataques informáticos, phishing (No Rights in #InternetVE Report 2021: Blockades, Censorship, Connectivity, Cyberattacks, Phishing),” VE sin Filtro, April 2022, [https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2021\\_annual\\_report/](https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2021_annual_report/).

255 “Sin Derechos en #InternetVE Reporte 2021,” April 2022.

256 VE sin Filtro, *Sin Derechos en #InternetVE: 2022 to 2023H1*, <https://vesinfiltro.com/res/files/2022-2023H1.pdf>. This report compiles official statistics from Venezuelan telecom regulators for the period spanning 2020 to the first semester of 2022. It also includes estimations based on other sources for the second semester of 2022 through the first semester of 2023, since official statistics were not available at the time of writing.

**Figure 5.** Line graph shared on social media depicting the drop in connectivity of most states in Venezuela on February 14, 2022.

This graph represents connectivity by counting the number of small blocks of IP addresses (each block being a /24 segment) that were successfully checked to be reachable from an external vantage point on the internet, presented normalized for easier comparison to the maximum value observed in the time period.



Source: Ve sin Filtro obtained data for this graph via Internet Outage Detection and Analysis's API.

the states of Barinas and Trujillo, and thirty-seven in Mérida.

Connectivity interruptions caused by electrical outages have been a constant since March 2019, when a nationwide blackout left most of Venezuela without electricity for approximately one week, and in some places even longer. In 2021, 293 connectivity interruptions were due to electrical outages, which represents 59.57 percent of

the incidents identified. There was a decrease in connectivity interruption incidents due to electrical outages in 2022, with a total of 34.88 percent of the events registered, or 201 events. The most affected states are Táchira, Trujillo, Barinas, Mérida, Portuguesa, and Lara. A national blackout that lasted almost a whole day occurred on February 14, 2022, causing a connectivity interruption in twenty-three states for nineteen hours and twenty minutes.

## Conclusion

Venezuela is once again at a crossroads between consolidating the authoritarian regime and initiating a transition toward redemocratization. While a majority of the population favors a return to democracy, economic and political factors within the country and internationally place obstacles to achieving this goal.

If control over the information space is a main pillar of the Venezuelan authoritarian regime, redemocratization should involve dismantling the repressive controls described in this report. Overcoming censorship and strengthening alternate information channels to level the playing field for competitive elections is critical. Moreover, circumventing surveillance is crucial for organization and mobilization toward a redemocratizing transition. Effectively countering authoritarian information operations and influence is another significant challenge for democratic actors.

While the path to redemocratization in Venezuela is uncertain and fraught with challenges, its potential positive impacts on Latin America are significant and far-reaching. Venezuela's redemocratization could have a positive domino effect in Latin America, given its outside influence in the region. The resolution of Venezuela's political crisis would likely decrease the massive outflow of refugees and migrants, easing the burden on neighboring countries. Moreover, a successful transition to democracy in Venezuela could inspire and embolden pro-democracy movements in other countries with authoritarian tendencies. Additionally, a democratic Venezuela would weaken the influence of authoritarian regimes in the region, strengthening the collective commitment to democratic values and human rights. Finally, a democratic Venezuela could reengage with regional economic blocs and partnerships, fostering trade, investment, and economic growth throughout Latin America, as it happened in the past.

# Appendix 1: Table of blocked news websites

Table listing blocked news websites as of October 2023, as documented by VE sin Filtro.

SITE	DOMAIN	ISP					
		CANTV	Movistar	Digitel	Inter	Netuno	SuperCable
2001	www.2001.com.ve	DNS	No	No	No	No	No
6to poder	6topoder.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Al navio	alnavio.com	No	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Alberto News	albertonews.com	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Alek boyd	alekboyd.blogspot.co.uk	DNS	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	No
Analisis 24	analisis24.com	No	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Antena 3	antena3internacional.com	DNS	No	No	No	No	No
Aporrea	www.aporrea.org	HTTPS +DNS	No	No	No	No	No
Armando info	armando.info	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No	DNS
Caraota digital	caraotadigital.xyz	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Caraota digital	www.caraotadigital.net	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
cronica.uno	cronica.uno	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Diario La Region	diariolaregion.net	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Dolar Paralelo	dollarparalelovenezuela.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS
Dolar today	dolartoday.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
dollar.nu	dollar.nu	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Efecto Cocuyo	efectococuyo.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
El Diario	eldiario.com	HTTPS +DNS	No	No	No	No	No
El Nacional	www.el-nacional.com	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
El Pitazo	elpitazo.net	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
El Tiempo	www.eltiempo.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
eldolarparalelo.info	eldolarparalelo.info	No	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
EVTV	evtmiami.com	HTTPS/ HTTP +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Infobae	www.infobae.media	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Insight Crime	es.insightcrime.org	HTTPS +DNS	No	No	No	No	No
La Gran Aldea	https://lagranaldea.com/	HTTPS +DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No

SITE	DOMAIN	ISP					
		CANTV	Movistar	Digitel	Inter	Netuno	SuperCable
La manada digital	lamanadigital.com	HTTPS+DNS	No	No	No	No	No
La patilla	www.lapatilla.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
liberal-venezolano.blogspot.com	liberal-venezolano.blogspot.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Maduradas	maduradas.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	No
Minuto 30	minuto30.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Monitoreamos	monitoreamos.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Noticia al día	noticiaaldia.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Noticias Venezuela	noticiasvenezuela.org	No	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Noticiero digital	www.noticierodigital.com	DNS	No	No	No	No	No
NTN 24	www.ntn24.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Primer informe	primerinforme.com	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Punto de corte	puntodecorte.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Runrunes	runrun.es	DNS	No	No	No	DNS	No
Sumarium	sumarium.es	HTTPS+DNS	No	No	No	No	No
TV Venezuela	www.tvvenezuela.tv	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Venezuela al día	venezuelaaldia.com	No	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Vivo play	vivoplay.net	No	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	No
VPITV	www.vpitr.com	HTTPS+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
www.aguacateverde.com	www.aguacateverde.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS
www.venezuelaaldia.com	www.venezuelaaldia.com	No	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Noticias	noticias.com	DNS	HTTPS/HTTP+DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Foco Informativo	focoinformativo.com	No	HTTPS/HTTP+DNS	No	No	No	No
Opinión y noticias	www.opinionynoticias.com	No	HTTPS/HTTP	No	No	No	No

## Appendix 2: Table of blocked political websites

Table listing blocked political content websites as of October 2023, as documented by VE sin Filtro.

SITE	DOMAIN	ISP					
		CANTV	Movistar	Digitel	Inter	Netuno	SuperCable
Presidencia VE	presidenciave.com	HTTPS, DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Infodio	infodio.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
PVenezuela	pvenezuela.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
vdebate	vdebate.blogspot.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Maduradas	www.maduradas.com	HTTPS, DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Buscador primarias 2023	buscadorprimaria2023.com	DNS	HTTPS/ HTTP	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
HugoCarvajal	hugocarvajal.com	HTTPS/ HTTP, DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Venezuela al día VE	venezuelaaidlive.com	No	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Vamos Bien	vamosbien.com	HTTPS, DNS	No	No	No	No	No
Vente Venezuela	www.ventevenezuela.org	HTTPS, DNS	No	No	No	No	No
MDI Venezuela	www.mdivenezuela.org	No					DNS
teleconsulta.presidenciave.org	teleconsulta.presidenciave.org	No	DNS	No	No	No	No

## Appendix 3: Table of blocked civil society organization websites

Table showing the active blocks of nongovernmental organizations and alternative domains, as of September 2023, as recorded by VE sin Filtro.

SITE	DOMAIN	ISP					
		CANTV	Movistar	Digitel	Inter	Netuno	SuperCable
Caracas Mi Convive	miconvive.com	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Change.org	www.change.org	HTTPS, DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	No
Observatorio de Finanzas	observatoriodefinanzas.com	DNS	HTTPS/HTTP, DNS	DNS	DNS	No	No
Salario Digno	salariodignovzla.com	DNS	HTTPS/HTTP	DNS	DNS	No	No
JEP Venezuela	www.jepvenezuela.com	HTTPS, DNS	No	No	No	No	No

## Appendix 4: Table of blocked anonymization and circumvention tool websites

Table listing blocked websites of different anonymization and censorship circumvention tools, including VPNs, as of October 2023, as documented by VE sin Filtro.

SITE	DOMAIN	ISP					
		CANTV	Movistar	Digitel	Inter	Netuno	SuperCable
Tunnelbear	tunnelbear.com	HTTPS/HTTP, DNS	DNS	No	HTTP, DNS	DNS	No
Tunnelbear	api.tunnelbear.com	HTTPS/HTTP, DNS	DNS	No	No	DNS	No
Psiphon	psiphon.ca	HTTPS, DNS	DNS	No	DNS	DNS	No
Hidemiyass	www.hidemiyass.com	No	No	No	No	DNS	No

## Acknowledgments



The DFR Lab would like to thank the government of Canada for its support of this report, and to thank the following participants in the roundtables and interviews. Their names and affiliation are listed in alphabetical order. We are also grateful to other participants in the roundtables and interviews who provided us with information on their research and who are not publicly mentioned below due to security concerns.

Adrián González, Cazadores de Fake News

Beatriz Borges, CEPAZ

Daniela Alvarado, IPYS Venezuela

David Aragort, RedesAyuda

Florantonia Singer, El País

Jesús Urbina, Transparencia Venezuela

Laura Helena Castillo, El BusTV

Luis Peche, Sala 58

María Fernanda Madriz, Servicio de Información Pública

Marivi Marín, Observatorio Digital ProBox

Marysabel Rodríguez, Espacio Público

Morella Alvarado, ININCO-UCV

Norma Rivas, Crónica Uno

Patricia Rodríguez, ReporteYA

Patricia Spadaro, ReporteYA

Raisa Urribarri, CIEPS

Rodolfo Rico, independent journalist and open-source investigator

William Peña, independent journalist

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