

Justyna Trubalska. *Venezuela – democracy at the crossroads?*, Episteme Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Lublin 2021, ISBN 978-83-65172-39-6, pp. 58.

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In recent years, the economic, political and social situation in Venezuela has become an interesting topic for researchers around the world, including those studying democracy. Since this topic is also interesting from the point of view of my research and personal interests, I read with interest the scientific work entitled *Venezuela – democracy at the crossroads?*, prepared in Polish by Justyna Trubalska (Trubalska, 2021). The monograph was published in 2021 by Episteme Publishing House in Lublin, Poland.

In her analysis, the author focused on the processes of Venezuela's political transformation from 1999 to December 2020. The adoption of this period is justified due to the qualitative change in the systemic transformation process that began when Hugo Chávez took office in 1999 and the continuation of the process during the tenure of President Nicolás Maduro since 2013.

The starting point for considering the condition of democracy in a country like Venezuela must be its economic and political situation. This is because the current socio-economic crisis in Venezuela is unprecedented not only in the country's history but is one of the most serious in the recent economic and political history of the world. In the face of huge hyperinflation, it is difficult to talk about the functioning of the economy. The economic collapse has taken on a scale that would only be expected in the event of extreme natural disasters or military confrontations.

Moreover, the political and economic destabilization of Venezuela affects the entire Latin American region. For several years, Venezuela practically disappeared from the maps of international trade and integration groups and multilateral forums in the region and in the world. In addition, the situation

in Venezuela has become the cause of the largest migration crisis in the history of the region (Gocłowska-Bolek, 2019). As of the end of 2022, more than 7.2 million people have fled Venezuela since 2013. Such an exodus causes complications in the host countries, mainly in Colombia, Peru and Chile, but also serves as a negative example during election campaigns in neighbouring countries as a warning against allowing left-wing candidates.

The inefficiency of the economy and its increasing inefficiency were already visible during the rule of Hugo Chávez, but they intensified during the rule of Nicolas Maduro, especially as a result of the collapse of oil prices since 2014. The socio-economic crisis was characterized by hyperinflation, shortages of basic foodstuffs, hygiene products and medicines, rising levels of poverty and hunger, recurring epidemics of treatable diseases in the developed world (including tuberculosis and malaria), massive increases in crime and mortality, the pervasive power of gangs and cartels drugs and mass emigration from the country.

The downturn in global markets led to a significant reduction in oil production in Venezuela, which was also caused by structural phenomena such as persistent lack of investment, modernization, maintenance and lack of qualified technical and engineering personnel. The government failed to reduce high spending in the face of declining oil revenues and tried to deny the existence of the crisis for a long time, and violently suppressed public discontent by depriving the opposition of the ability to act and by intervening in street protests, which led to the death of hundreds of people.

The causes of the Venezuelan crisis are complex, but the most important explanation is the political and social idea that has been developed for two decades, i.e. “socialism of the 21st century”. It was Venezuelan socialism, which Chávez introduced with the support of Cuba, and which the Maduro regime still advocates, focused like a lens all the remaining economic and political problems and mistakes.

Venezuela is not the only Latin American country that has experimented with socialist rule since the beginning of the 21st century, although it is true that it was in Venezuela that it took a radical form. Implementing the utopian “socialism of the 21st century”, Chávez carried out expropriation, nationalization, created parallel structures of “people’s power”, fought a “battle for trade” (creating a network of state-owned stores and catering outlets), significantly limited the possibility of independent mass media (Brewer-Carías, 2010).

The current crisis is not only a direct consequence of the economy’s excessive dependence on oil. However, in the case of Venezuela, a number of phenomena have also become apparent that, at the same time, are not so intense in any other country today: incompetent governance, the dismantling of institutions, massive corruption, clientelism, populism, growing authoritarianism, sanctions imposed by the United States and Colombia, the boycott of Nicolas Maduro by the opposition, strengthened by the great reluctance of international circles, lack of restructuring of foreign debt, long-term neglect in the field of infrastructure, lack of investment in any economic sector, numer-

ous mistakes in economic policy fuelling hyperinflation, weakening of market mechanisms, and at the same time also the unfavourable role of the remnants of capitalism in this increasingly inefficient economy.

Hugo Chávez, and even more so his successor Nicolás Maduro, squandered the opportunity to strengthen the Venezuelan economy and diversify it using revenues from the oil sector in times of prosperity. Socialist leaders squandered the country's oil wealth, leaving the economy in decline and society on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. Moreover, they have led to a significant weakening of democratic institutions, so that Venezuela is now considered an authoritarian country by international institutions (EIU, 2022, p. 30).

The political and economic background described above became the basis for the reflections on the state of Venezuelan democracy. The author begins her monograph with a theoretical chapter, in which she outlines the problems of the hybrid regime, pointing to Venezuela as an example of such a regime. For the purposes of the study, the author assumed that Venezuela is a country whose regime should be described as competitive authoritarianism. The advanced implementation of solutions, mechanisms and regulations characteristic of the indicated regime allows – according to the Author – to indicate that in the coming years the regime will consolidate and develop. The dynamics of political processes in Venezuela does not preclude a retreat from the transformation towards an authoritarian one, but it will be a long-term process requiring gradual and consistent actions. However, taking into account the advancement of pathologies in political life (clientelism, corruption), it is a process that also requires time, a change in the mentality of the decision-making centre and, above all, building a mature civil society in Venezuela.

Although the period 1999–2020 was mainly analysed, the author also briefly outlined the historical background, i.e. the situations of transformation of the state system from the end of the 19th century. The author pointed out the changes from the establishment of the First Republic of Venezuela to 1999, referring to the conditions for contemporary transformation processes, political culture, as well as the reasons for society's support for a strong executive power. Then, in the following chapters, the author analyses the situation of Venezuela separately under the presidencies of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro (until December 2020). The author also devotes a lot of attention to the issue of dual power in Venezuela, related to the assumption by the oppositionist Juan Guaido of the role of interim president (in January 2019).

Justyna Trubalska adopted the analysis of political transformation in Venezuela as the aim of her study. This is important because the constitution announced in 1999 did not determine the final system of the state in an unambiguous way. This systemic ambiguity caused the legislative process to define Venezuela as a democratic state, but the functioning of state bodies and institutions, as well as the relationship between the centre of power and the society, show many discrepancies.

The chapter entitled “Venezuela of President Hugo Chávez” indicates the main legal and political decisions that started the dynamic process of political

transformation towards authoritarianism. The conditions of this process were analysed and an attempt was made to indicate its consequences. In turn, the chapter “Venezuela of President Nicolás Maduro” analyses the decisions that strengthened the processes initiated by Hugo Chávez, and also indicated the differences in the manner of holding office. The chapters on the analysis of the presidency were presented in a problematic way, the author’s intention was to show the main tendencies and factors influencing the political transformation, not an in-depth analysis of all political events.

The author attempts to determine the directions of political transformation in Venezuela, but without evaluating the quality of democracy. This is only an attempt to determine the future direction of the transformation. After reading this chapter, you may feel a bit unsatisfied, because it would be worth presenting a rating as well. It would also help if the author added the broader economic and social background, which is of key importance for the state of democracy in Venezuela.

Although a few decades ago Venezuela was one of the richest countries in Latin America, enjoying prosperity and a relatively high standard of living, since the beginning of this century it has been undergoing rapid changes and the situation has deteriorated. This country has also become an example of deliberate, systemic corruption of democratic institutions. Therefore, the author’s undertaking of the subject of democracy in Venezuela is deeply justified from the point of view of the country’s history and present, as well as the impact that this example has on other countries in the region and beyond. In her monograph, the author Justyna Trubalska took up an important topic and made interesting analyses. It is gratifying that a new, promising name has appeared on the Polish academic scene of democracy researchers.

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