

PEACEPTIONS

FROM CRIMINAL PEACE TO CITIZEN'S PEACE

The Case of Venezuela

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Venezuela has been one of the most violent countries without a formal war. Nevertheless, the debate on the multiple crises, focuses on the political regime and not the underlying conflicts.



Approaches to violence reduction by the government include cooperation, cooptation, and repression (criminal peace) while civil society approaches favour dialogue and inclusion of marginalized groups (citizens peace).



Peacebuilding needs to improve access to basic goods irrespective of the affiliations with a specific government or political party and find creative ways to do justice to the victims.

FROM CRIMINAL PEACE TO CITIZEN'S PEACE

The Case of Venezuela



Venezuela is an unusual context for a study on peace and peacebuilding but a »conflict and peace« lens helps us to understand the main dynamics and the political economy driving violences and civil resistance. In this report we draw on a collective research project conducted between 2020 and 2021 by the FES in Venezuela. The main questions we asked are: How can violences be reduced in a way that individual and collective human rights are guaranteed, and the underlying conflicts transformed in a constructive way. What are the baselines for the three pillars of peace – security, participation, conflict transformation – at the national and at a variety of local levels. What perceptions do different

actors in Venezuela have on what peace is and how it can be built? Which actors at the local, national, and international level have a role in peacebuilding? We will start with the analysis of the main conflicts shaping the Venezuelan multi-crisis. The Venezuela case study teaches us some specific challenges of peacebuilding in a highly violent but no-war context: First, the topic of peace is not high on the political agenda despite high levels of individual and collective violence and the fact that the government instrumentalizes the term »peace« for policies of repression and militarization. Second, similar to other contexts, the notions of peace by the majority of the people are closely related to

the desire for tranquillity regarding everyday life. This does not imply that peace does not matter but rather that people seem to have a more modest ambition or a pluralist understanding where the possibility to be in charge of their own life is key. Respect and personal security are also important. Although broader notions of change or transformations are rarely mentioned, the guarantee of tranquillity, respect and personal security do depend on profound changes in countries like Venezuela. This broad consensus, in both, our survey and the local studies, should thus inform and guide peacebuilding strategies.

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1

INTRODUCTION – THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF PEACEPTION

The PEACEption project is a collaborative and participatory project between the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Berlin, a number of national FES offices and many local researchers and partners. The overall objective is to identify and analyse the understanding and perception of peace by different actors and the general population in the six countries participating in the study (Colombia, Venezuela, Cameroon, the Philippines, Tunisia and South Sudan).

It was Willy Brandt who coined the famous phrase *»Peace is not everything, but without peace everything is nothing«*. Many political sermons, national and international policy documents postulate »peace« as a goal. This is nothing new; it permeates time and space. However, there are differences in the underlying definitions and concepts of peace, as well as in the answers to the question of how to achieve and maintain peace. Understandings of peace and its goals vary among external and internal actors at the international, national and local levels, as well as among different population groups. Understanding these differences is key to developing context-specific strategies for sustainable peacebuilding. The project follows a common methodology using the same key concepts in order to set the necessary scientific standards for the comparability of the country studies.

The core of the project is to provide a conceptual framework within which different conceptions of peace can be highlighted and their differences analysed in order to formulate concrete proposals for peacebuilding. The concept of peace is based on three basic functions of any society across time and space, across historical and cultural boundaries: (i) security, i.e. physical integrity; (ii) participation, i.e. individual and collective human rights; and (iii) a set of norms and values that enable constructive conflict transformation. However, the specific forms these three pillars take vary according to historical and cultural legacies as well as political and economic developments, among other factors. From this perspective, peacebuilding is a non-linear and multi-scalar process shaped by local, national and international developments and dynamics, and by a variety of actors.

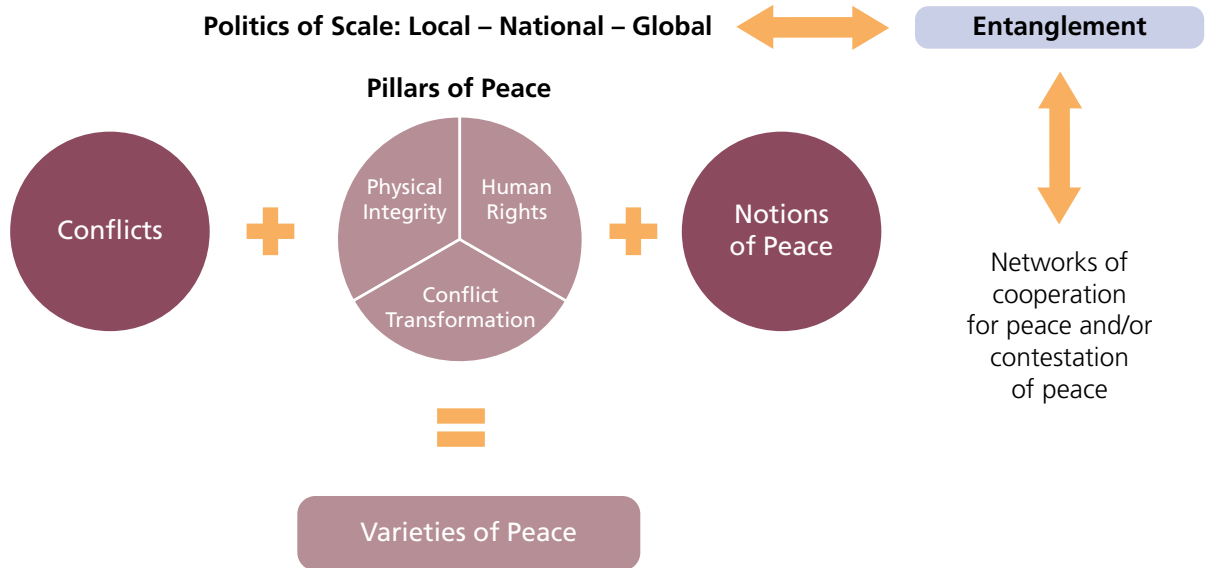
The case studies use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. As a first step, the key conflicts (and their actors) are analysed at different levels. Qualitative and quantitative data on the three pillars of peace make it possible to identify deficits as well as opportunities for peacebuilding. Quantitative data is drawn from international sources to make the results comparable across case studies, with available national and sub-national data being used to complement and deepen the analysis. Qualitative case studies from local contexts of varying degrees of peacefulness provide nuanced information on specific conflicts, actors and contexts. The picture is rounded off by a survey of the prevailing notions of what peace means to different groups of actors (see chart below). The survey serves as a baseline for the needs and preferences of the respective society.

The overall objectives of the project are thus

1. to understand peace by analysing underlying conflicts and the peace conceptions of different actors and levels within and between societies based on a consistent framework;
2. to assess peace by comparing the status of the three main pillars of peace at national, sub-national and transnational levels and their entanglements;
3. to promote peace by developing policy recommendations that can bridge different meanings and conceptions of peace in the cases analysed and more generally for the FES and other actors.

Beyond the policy level, the results of the project can also be useful for the strategic planning of the FES offices involved. They help to analyse the interrelationships and trade-offs between different areas of FES work at the country level and the development of peace as an overarching goal.

Figure 1:
The PEACEptions methodology



Source: Kurtenbach (2021: 345).

2

THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT IN VENEZUELA

Venezuela is an unusual context for a study on peace and peacebuilding. At the international level, relations with neighbouring Colombia have been contentious in recent decades, leading to calls for constructive conflict management (Birke Daniels, Stollreiter and Wegner 2021). However, the main debates on Venezuela's multiple crises, violence and political developments tend to revolve around the question of the political regime, i.e. autocracy versus democracy and the role of elections, as well as the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. Analysis through a »conflict and peace« lens is rare, since Venezuela is not experiencing an open war or armed conflict, despite its high levels of violence. Nevertheless, this perspective helps us to understand the main dynamics and political economy driving violence and civil resistance.

In these non-war contexts, peacebuilding needs to go beyond the liberal template, i.e. the delegation of constructive conflict transformation to the political democratic system, with an emphasis on civil and political rights. We need to recognise that the liberal approach is only one, very specific, strategy for reducing violence, guaranteeing human rights and transforming conflicts. The debate on »authoritarian« or »illiberal« peacebuilding (Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran 2018; Lewis 2022) shows that we need to recognise and take into account these other strategies of conflict *management* rather than conflict *transformation*. With the liberal peace template under serious attack for its lack of contextual sensitivity in the face of high-profile failures (such as in Afghanistan or Central America), and with the re-emergence of »realist« policy frameworks in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a broader perspective is called for.

In this report, we draw on a collective research project conducted by the FES in Venezuela between 2020 and 2021 (López and Kurtenbach 2023). The main questions we asked were: How can violence be reduced in a way that guarantees individual and collective human rights and constructively transforms the underlying conflicts? What is the basis for the three pillars of peace at the national and various local levels? What are the perceptions of different actors in Venezuela about what peace is and how it can be built? Which actors at the local, national and international levels have a role to play in peacebuilding? We will begin by analysing the main conflicts that have shaped the Venezuelan multi-crisis.

3

MAIN CONFLICT STRUCTURES – REPRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL CONFLICTS WITH NEW DYNAMICS

Venezuela's conflicts are shaped by the interaction and intermingling of several long-standing and deeply rooted historical crises. These are

- in the structural economic sphere, the high dependence on oil, i.e. a rentier economy;
- in the political sphere, high levels of polarisation and the devaluation of democratic and institutional channels for conflict transformation;
- and, last but not least, in the social and everyday sphere, a humanitarian emergency and high levels of political, criminal and social violence.

The causes of these conflicts are complex, and their violent escalation or mitigation does not follow linear paths. Rather, it is evident that a variety of political, economic and social factors tend to interact and shape the specific outcomes (Smilde 2018). At the same time, we must be aware that this interaction is not static, but adapts to changing contexts and local, national, regional and international dynamics.

On the economic front, Venezuela is a rich country, with the world's largest oil reserves under its surface, according to the US Energy Information Administration. In debates on peace and conflict, the role of natural resources (Le Billon 2013), and oil in particular (Ross 2004; 2015), in the emergence and dynamics of armed conflict occupies an important place. The argument is that abundance fosters the duration of authoritarian regimes, corruption and violent conflict in low- and middle-income countries. For many years, Venezuela has been a counterfactual case, as Venezuela has been a democracy since 1958 and oil wealth has been distributed rather than used exclusively for patronage and personal enrichment (Mähler 2011). But although many governments promised to build a development model for the day when the oil bonanza would end, not much happened. Neither the governments of the social-democratic *Acción Democrática* (AD), nor the Christian-democratic *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI), nor *Chavismo*, which came to power in 1998, changed the development model towards a more sustainable one. As a result, Venezuela remains vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil prices. Time and again, falling oil revenues have led to widespread crises.

In the second half of the 20th century, Venezuelan politics was characterised by a two-party system. However, the

traditional system failed to address structural conflicts – economic, political and social – and the election of Hugo Chávez as president in 1998 initially appeared to be a democratic response to the demands of the country's marginalised sectors. Chávez's electoral victory ushered in profound changes to the political system, such as the new political constitution of 1999. During his first two administrations (1998–2006), the oil bonanza allowed him to mitigate some of the existing conflicts by implementing social policies for the inclusion and participation of the country's most marginalised sectors (Ellner 2011). Popular support allowed for substantial changes in both the state administration and the political system. However, neither the economic nor the political changes proved to be sustainable. Economically, Venezuela remained dependent on oil (Dachevsky and Kornbliht 2017), and politically, the changes devalued the rule of law and important counterweights to the government, such as an independent judiciary.

In terms of violence, the situation changed radically at the beginning of the 21st century, when Venezuela became one of the countries with the highest homicide rate. Despite the ban on publishing figures, according to unofficial data 136,241 murders were committed between 1999 and 2010 (Briceño-León 2012, 3239). This increase can be explained by two factors: 1) the collapse of the socio-political and political pact between the two traditional parties; 2) the *Chavista* government's ambivalent attitude towards violence (Briceño-León 2006). Since coming to power, Chávez repeatedly expressed his understanding of poverty-related criminal violence, while at the same time militarising the government's security policy.

In the crisis of the second decade of the 21st century, several elements related to the economic, political and social spheres interacted: First, with the death of the charismatic leader Hugo Chávez and the appointment (and subsequent election) of Nicolás Maduro, the political regime suffered a crisis of legitimacy. Maduro – who lacks Chávez's charisma – won the presidential elections in April 2013, albeit by a narrow margin (Chávez had died just a month earlier, on 5 March). In 2015, the political opposition scored a victory by winning a majority in parliament. The government responded with a policy of interference in key institutions of the political system, such as the judiciary and the electoral authority, and the convening of an all-powerful constituent assembly in 2017.

The economic crisis has led to a dramatic increase in various illegal economies. A recent study by *Transparencia Venezuela* (2022, 27) estimates that the four main illegal economies (drug trafficking, gold smuggling, extortion at ports and fuel smuggling) account for 21.74 per cent of the country's gross domestic product in 2021. There are two major territorial focuses for these illicit economies: the border with Colombia for drug trafficking, and the Arco Minero, a vast area south of the Orinoco River that is one of the most biodiverse areas of the Amazon rainforest, especially for illegal mining and gold smuggling.

Political unrest increased with the dispute over the 2018 presidential elections, as most opposition parties called for a boycott due to the lack of minimum guarantees. Maduro was elected with only 46 per cent of the vote. At the beginning of 2019, the crisis escalated. The opposition majority in the National Assembly refused to recognise Maduro's election and declared the president of the assembly, Juan Guaidó, interim president. Surprisingly for many inside and outside the country, the Trump administration immediately recognised him as president, followed by other international actors in both Latin America and Europe.

Both the humanitarian crisis and the lack of prospects for political change increased the flow of cross-border migration. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), more than seven million people are estimated to have left the country by the beginning of 2023. In this complex context, the main pillars of peace, namely physical security, individual and collective human rights and mechanisms for constructive conflict transformation have deteriorated at the national and various local levels.

While local conflicts are influenced and shaped by this common background, they also have specific historical trajectories and dynamics.

Valles del Tuy (Llorens and Alzualde 2023), for example, is a region close to Caracas that in the late 1970s and early 1980s was an industrialising and manufacturing zone with high levels of state investment in infrastructure such as housing, schools and hospitals. The situation changed completely after a natural disaster in the neighbouring state of Vargas, when thousands of displaced people moved into the region, outnumbering the local population, and public services collapsed due to lack of state funding. Conflict and violence increased significantly.

Conflicts in the border region are different (Sánchez 2023). The 2,000 km border between Venezuela and Colombia is difficult to patrol and did not play a major role in the daily lives of the population until the first border closure in 2015. The region is strongly influenced by developments on both sides. In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with Latin America's oldest guerrilla group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), and began a dialogue with another Colombian guerrilla group, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). In this context, the border became important as dissident FARC fighters and parts of the ELN used Venezuela as a refuge. After a brief lull, violence increased and armed actors continued to control and impose order in the region. The local study highlights that people in the borderlands believe that the conflict was brought to them by the central governments in Venezuela and Colombia. Border migration is widespread, with people living on one side of the border and working on the other, and vice versa. The closure of the border has therefore had a significant impact on daily life.

The main conflicts in the region south of the Orinoco (Bolívar, Amazonas and Apure states) (Botero and Sánchez 2023) are related to the control of legal and illegal resources. In February 2016, the Maduro government opened up the region to mining (gold, coltan, bauxite, diamonds), creating the »Orinoco Mining Arc National Strategic Development Zone«. This led to a series of conflicts (and violence) due to high levels of illegal mining and the presence of various armed actors (state and non-state, Venezuelan and Colombian, including the Russian Wagner Group; see Rabin 2019). Violence has targeted indigenous communities and human rights and environmental activists.

In the poor communities of Caracas that we analysed in our study, Catuche and Cota 905 (Zubillaga and Caveda 2023), structural conflicts are manifested in conflicts over the lack of opportunities for young, marginalised men and, closely related, the control of drug trafficking. The government's social aid has been directed towards families, women and children, discriminating against young men and leaving them with few options other than petty crime and drug trafficking.

4

THE THREE PILLARS OF PEACE AT THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

This section presents national and local data on the three pillars of peace: physical integrity, human rights and institutions for conflict transformation. The quantitative national data come from a variety of international databases and are used for cross-case comparison. The local data come from national sources or from the qualitative local studies, i.e. interviews and focus groups, or from both. These studies were carried out in five locations (see map): Valles del Tuy, the border with Colombia, the south of Orinoquia and the communities of Cota 905 and Catuche in Caracas. These data reflect the different crises and conflicts described above.

4.1 PHYSICAL INTEGRITY

While we can see a deterioration in physical integrity since the 1990s, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) database does not record collective violence – i.e. armed conflict or civil war – but violence against civilians, with 1,375 people killed, peaking between 1990 and 1995 and rising again since 2014 (see Figure 2).

WHO national homicide data (available only until 2019) show a slight increase, while data from the Venezuelan

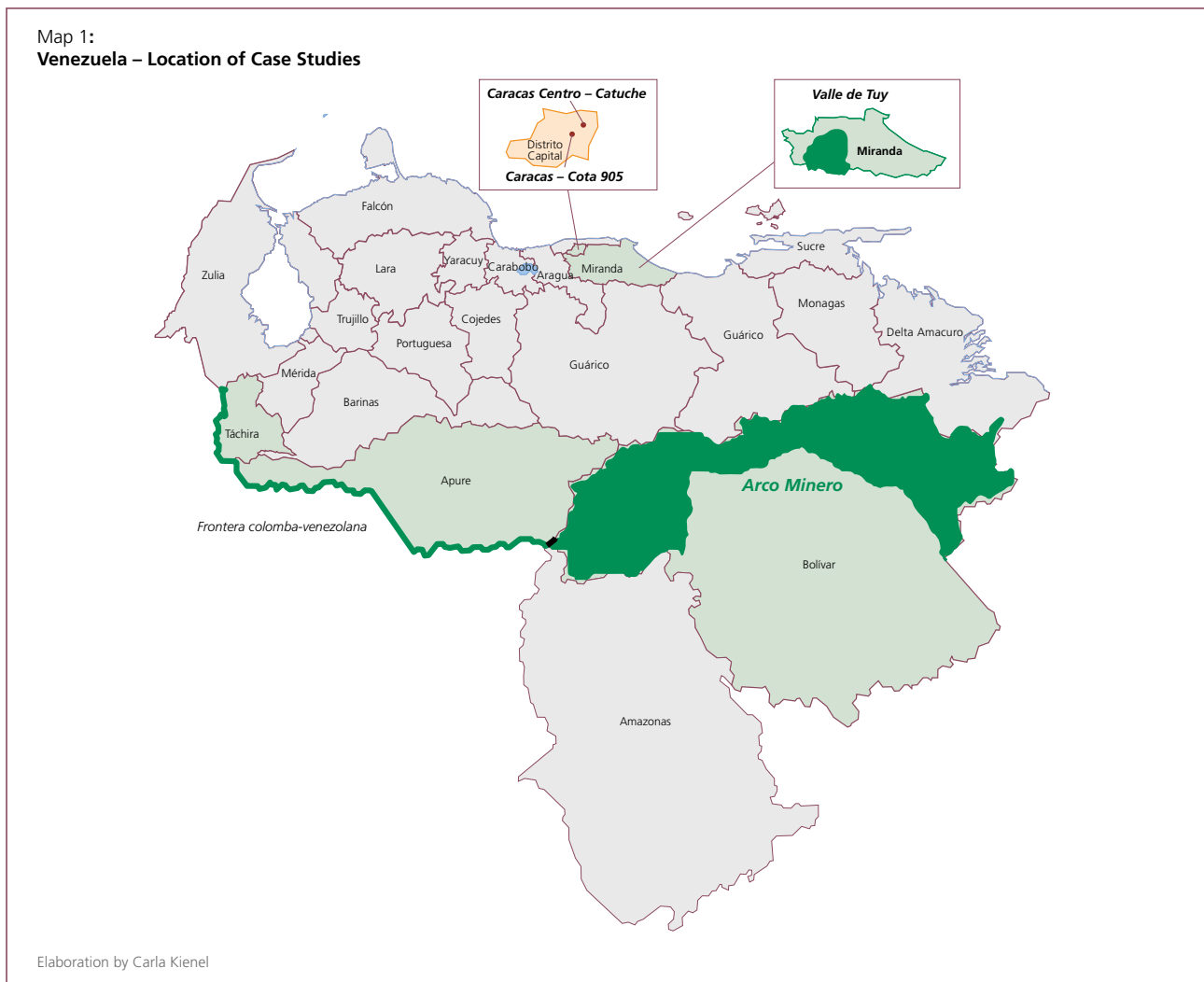
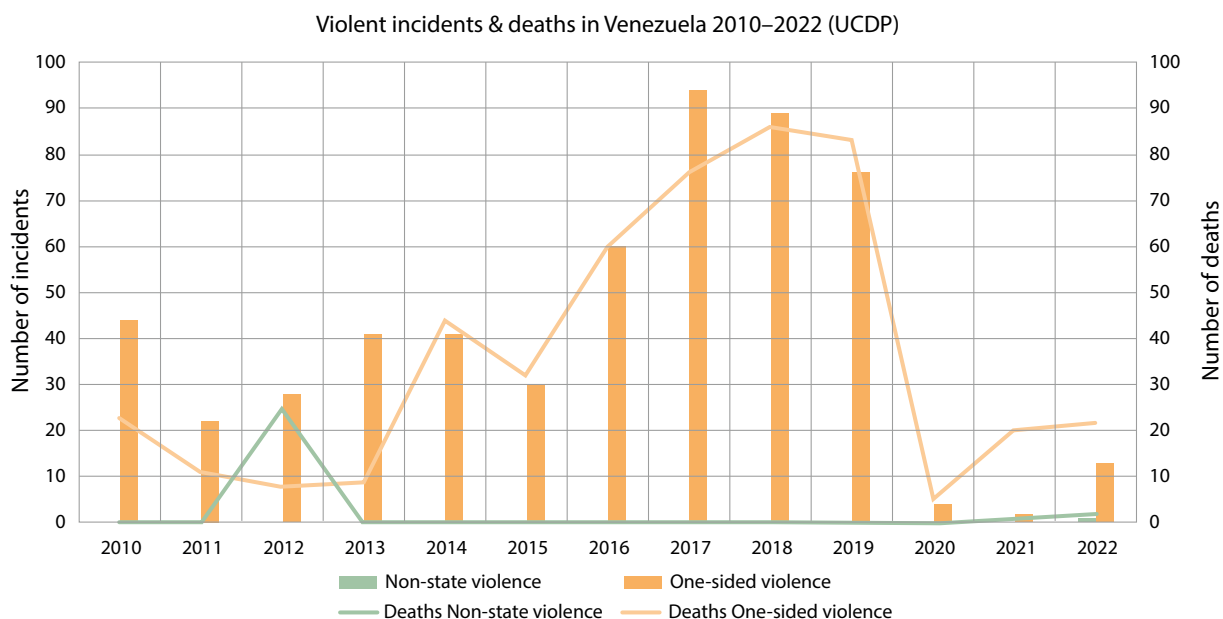
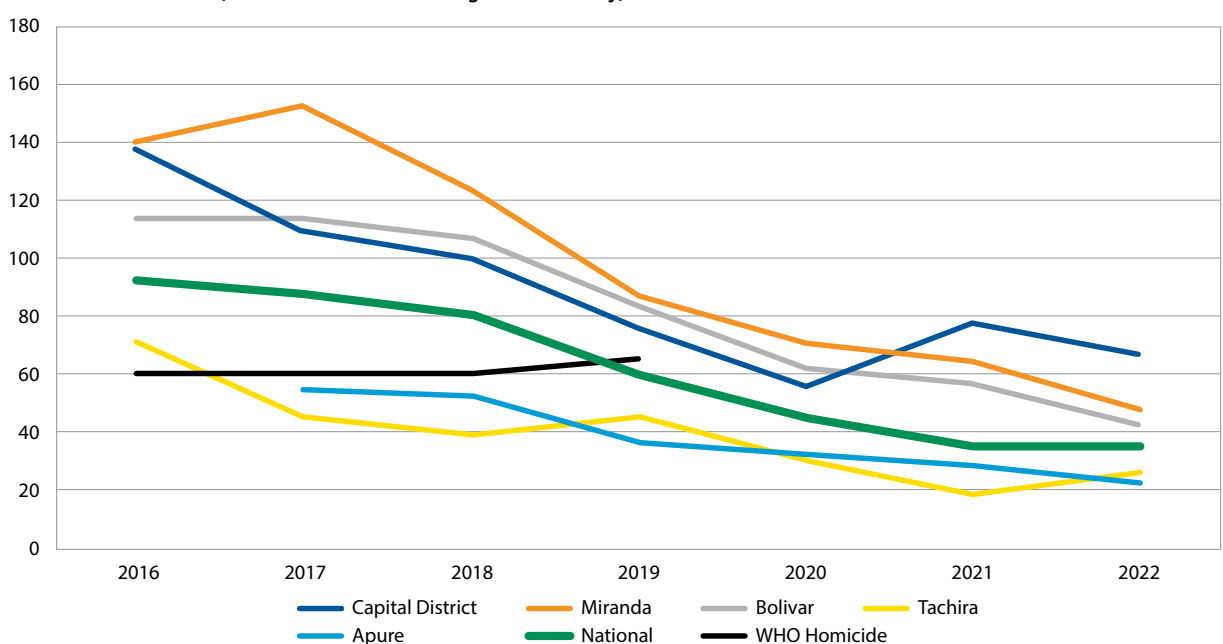


Figure 2:
Armed Conflict (UCDP)



Source: Carla Kienel based on data from UCDP: <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/101> (date of retrieval: 23/07/26)

Figure 3:
Rate of Violent Deaths (homicide and resistance against authority)



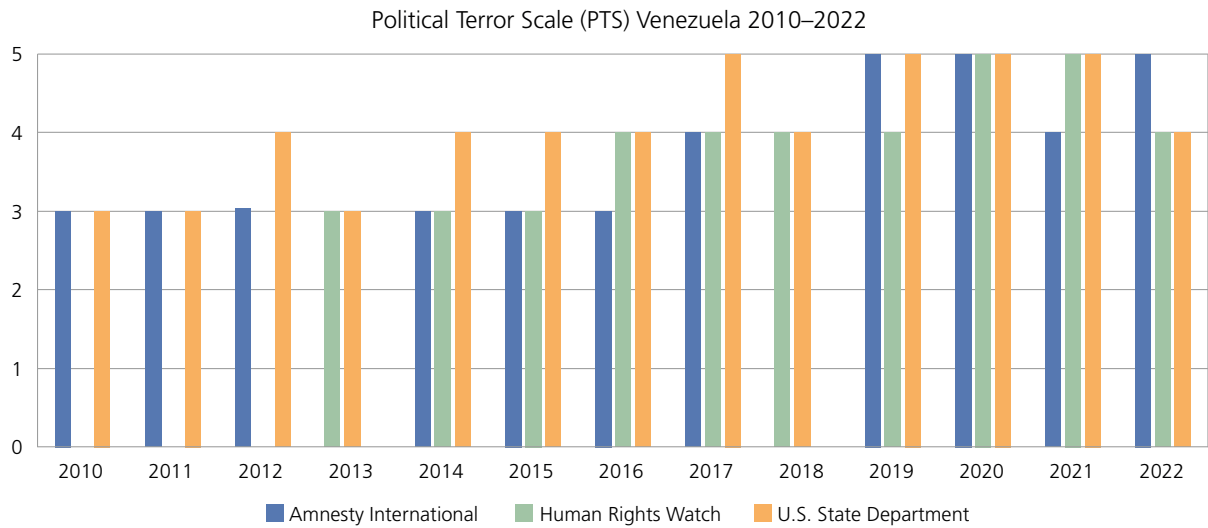
Sources: Observatorio de Violencia en Venezuela (annual reports 2016–2022) and WHO (Estimates of rate of homicides [per 100,000 population] [who.int])

Observatory of Violence (OVV) show an overall decrease (see Figure 2). One reason for this may be that the OVV records violent deaths, i.e. homicides plus deaths in acts of resistance to authority. But the different forms of violence are also linked to the multiple crises in the country. State repression (see Figure 3) has increased with the organisation of protests in the country, for example, in 2014. Data collection is complicated by the fact that repression is not only carried out by state institutions – police and armed forces – but also by the so-called *colectivos*, which act as a shock force for

Chavismo and other non-state armed actors (Ávila 2023). It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to make a clear distinction between state violence and other forms of violence.¹

¹ Not covered by these data is the practice of enforced disappearance, which is applied to detainees for political reasons. Although they are not usually indefinite, several cases have been reported; e.g.: <https://runrun.es/megafono/499726/ddhh-olvidados-hugo-marino-cumple-cuatro-anos-de-desaparicion-forzada/> (last accessed: 13.02.2024).

Figure 4:
State Repression (2010–2022)



Source: Carla Kienel based on Gibney et al. <http://www.politicalerrorscale.org>. (accessed on 25/7/2023), distinguishing between five levels of state violence.

Definitions used to define levels of political terror in Figure 4:

Level 3: There is extensive political imprisonment, or a recent history of such imprisonment. Execution or other political murders and brutality may be common. Unlimited detention, with or without a trial, for political views is accepted.

Level 4: Civil and political rights violations have expanded to large numbers of the population. Murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life. In spite of its generality, on this level terror affects primarily those who interest themselves in politics or ideas.

Level 5: Terror has expanded to the whole population. The leaders of these societies place no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals.

Source: Political Terror Scale Data • The Political Terror Scale

The spatial variation in violence is linked to specific contexts. Figure 2 shows the data for violent deaths at the national level and in the states of our local case studies. There is a clear division between those with a higher rate – the capital district, Miranda and Bolívar – and those with lower levels of violence – the border with Colombia: Tachirá and Apure. Bolívar is a hotspot of the illegal economy (drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal mining, among others), where many armed actors with and without links to the Venezuelan state operate, as well as some Colombian groups. Transparencia Venezuela (2022) documents the existence of at least 13 criminal organisations.

These data show the spatial variations in violence, although the main hotspots remain the same – at the departmental

level, the capital district and the states of Miranda and Bolívar remain among the most violent, despite the overall decrease in rates.

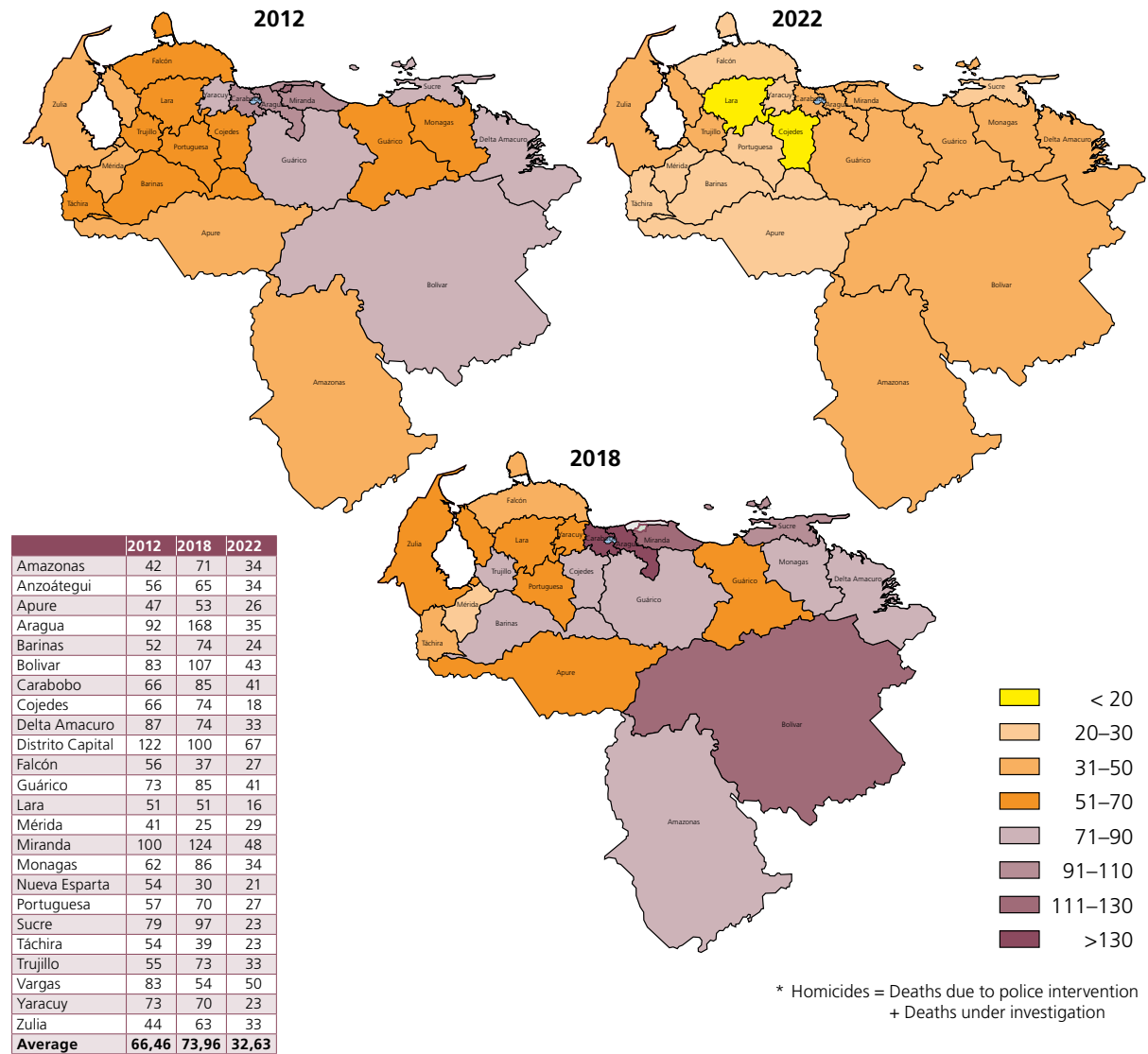
Variations in the right to physical integrity are reflected in a number of statements made by our interviewees.

In Valles del Tuy (Llorens/Alzualde, p. 2), a teacher describes how violence by criminal gangs, known as «sindicatos», has increased and affected her life:

I started to have problems in my community; once I wanted to celebrate the fifth birthday of one of my children and someone came to me and told me that I had to ask permission to celebrate the birthday; that day I knew I had to leave, I didn't want to live there anymore. Things have happened before, three people have been killed in front of my house ...

The government responded to the growing violence in the Tuy Valley with a security policy that initially sought to negotiate with the non-state armed actors (Zones of Peace) and then turned to punitive imprisonment, turning the overcrowded prisons into centres of organised crime, similar to those in Brazil or El Salvador. This created a «criminal peace» and a certain reduction in violence based on the co-optation and cooperation between organised crime and the Venezuelan state. These policies were later replicated in other local contexts, such as La Cota 905 in Caracas. Overall, these policies have strengthened the grip of organised crime on these communities through the creation of so-called mega gangs, leaving the population under the direct control of organised crime, in a state of insecurity, state violence and an uncertain future in which these groups could return.

Map 2:
Violent Deaths per 100,000 Inhabitants



Source: Carla Kienel based on data from the Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia

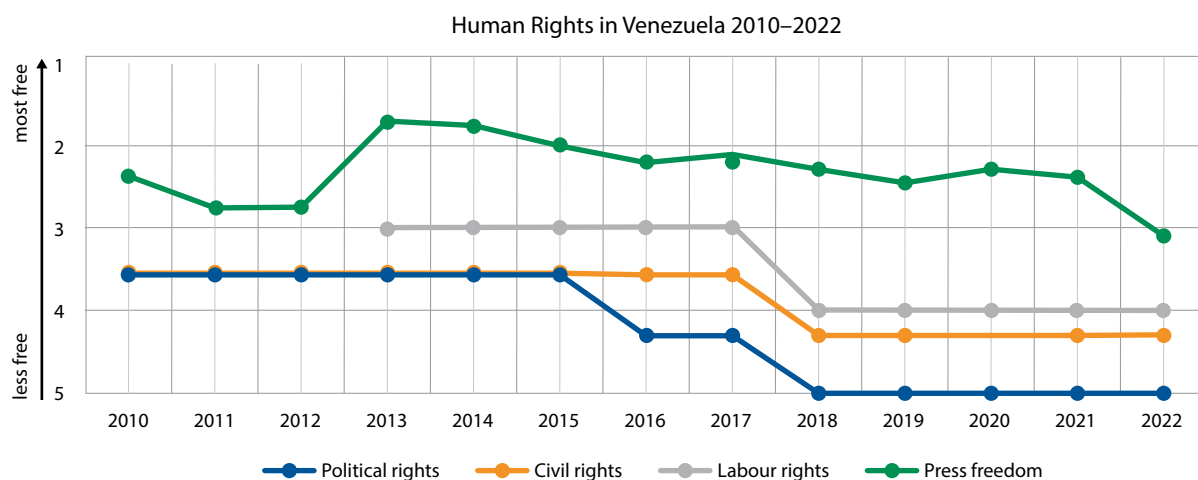
In Caracas, the rate of violence fell from 100 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 to 56.5 in 2020. Several hypotheses can explain this: First, this decrease is related to the high migration of poor, young men, or to the massive assassinations of young males by state security forces – 4,000 young men died in 2016. However, in the two local studies of Catuche and Cota 905, we see other reasons for the decline. In Catuche, mothers organised a pact between local youth gangs that significantly reduced violence, while in Cota 905 the state sent in the military and police to suppress the »megabanda« with whom it had previously collaborated. In the border areas between Colombia and Venezuela (the states of Tachir and Apure), violence has increased on both sides (although more so on the Colombian side). A large number of Colombian and Venezuelan state and non-state armed actors dispute territorial control and use violence against each other and against civil society. However, the border areas are not the most violent places in Venezuela.

In summary, we can observe a changing pattern of security and physical integrity in relation to specific places and times. When and where conflicts over resources, political and social participation, and mobility increase, different forms of violence may increase. The changing patterns of response by the government, its armed allies and non-state armed actors increase insecurity.

4.2 HUMAN RIGHTS

Guaranteeing individual and collective human rights is the second pillar of peace. In Venezuela, we can observe a decline in the guarantee of civil and political rights over the last decade, which is also linked to political and social conflict. Not only was the political opposition mobilised, but also many people who formed the Chavista base in the barrios joined the protests (e.g. in 2017 and 2019). While the

Figure 5:
Individual and Collective Human Rights



Source: Carla Kienel based on Freedom House, International Trade Union Confederation.

opposition's focus was on civil and political rights (including clean elections, independence of the judiciary and freedom of assembly), the humanitarian crisis provoked protests in communities over the lack of public services such as water, electricity and food insecurity, or lack of access to health care.

The picture is similarly bleak when it comes to labour rights and press freedom. According to the International Trade Union Confederation's annual report – the Labour Rights Index – the situation in Venezuela was mediocre (3 on a scale of 1=very protected to 5=not protected at all) until 2017/2018, and has since dropped another point to 4. In terms of press freedom, the Reporters Without Borders index ranks Venezuela 148th (out of 180), a decline that began in 2014, when Venezuela was 116th. The UNESCO Observatory on Murdered Journalists documents seven confirmed cases and two under investigation by 2020.

In early 2019, there were large opposition demonstrations with broad participation from different political and social groups – in the hope that political change would be possible. In its annual report for 2019, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) documented 16,739 demonstrations across the country, making it the year with the most protests in the last decade. Faced with growing protests and a loss of legitimacy, the Maduro government's containment strategy has been very effective, using a mix of violent repression (see above) and a »divide and rule« strategy. Two factors have hindered the construction of a broad and durable opposition front: first, the political opposition remains highly fragmented and did not (and still does not) have a common, comprehensive vision of Venezuela's future. It continues to prioritise political and civil rights issues – which are undoubtedly important – but on socio-economic issues it emphasises the recovery of the oil sector and a free market model. Second, for the population in urban neighbourhoods and marginalised rural areas, the priority is to develop strategies to tackle the food crisis and access to public services, especially health and

education. Not only has the percentage of undernourished people increased since 2014, but the percentage of children without access to education also increased between 2013 and 2021. In the 18–24 age group, access to schooling has fallen from 40 per cent to 15 per cent for men and from 43 per cent to 20 per cent for women (ENJUVE 2021). In this situation of scarcity, survival is much more important for many people than protesting, which could jeopardise government aid such as the basic food boxes (CLAP).

In terms of human rights, it is also important to analyse differences across the territory. In our local case studies, interviewees complain of a range of human rights violations, but in all cases the specific levels of violence and the presence of state and non-state armed actors add another layer to the already complicated situation and to restrictions on human rights in the country at the national level. Mobility is a major issue in the border region with Colombia.

In Valles del Tuy (Llorens and Azualde 2023), people comment on the violence during the elections between factions of the ruling party, as well as the actions of armed groups to prevent voting:

»There was coercion by armed groups so that people didn't go to vote, or the centres were closed, people wanted to vote and no, the centre was closed, there is no voting, mind you, in an internal PSUV election ... it's an incredible thing. In the end this candidate lost by two thousand votes that everyone knows, if they had allowed people to vote in legal terms, without coercion, without the mobilisation of the whole issue of the mayor's office with the issue of the red assembly points² outside that force you to register before voting and they give you your bag in those points.«

² These are government party centres set up outside polling stations, where supporters have to register before voting in order to receive the food bags distributed by the government.

At the same time, the deterioration of human rights – such as freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and freedom of movement – is driven not only by the absence of the rule of law, but also by the criminal governance of armed groups in some regions of the Valles del Tuy.

Another problem arises in the border region (Sánchez 2023). Here, it is said that border dwellers suffer discrimination in terms of their political and cultural rights, and that the logic of central governments dominates. After the first closure of the border in 2015, the Venezuelan government militarised the zone, leading to a further deterioration of basic human rights and sidelining opposition local and regional elected governments through the installation of a so-called protector appointed by the government. Similarly, the closure of the border increased the profits of armed actors who control (and profit from) cross-border trade. Although the border was reopened in September 2022 following the election of Gustavo Petro in Colombia, these problems persist.

In the region south of the Orinoco (Botero and Sánchez 2023), human rights violations are also linked to the lack of recognition and protection of indigenous communities, especially when they resist legal and illegal mining projects that have a serious negative impact on the Amazon ecosystem. Since the Venezuelan state has little presence in the region, distances are long and a variety of armed actors exploit the resources, local communities have little access to education, health and telecommunications. There is a widespread feeling among local communities that they will derive little or no benefit from the mining projects, but will have to cope with the violence and disastrous ecological consequences.

In Catuche, one of the communities studied in Caracas (Zubillaga and Caveda 2023a), respondents said »There is no right to anything,« individual human rights such as the right of expression or assembly are threatened and restricted by armed pro-state actors who control and intimidate the population. This is despite the fact that, compared to other areas, community organisations in Catuche are very active, have some agency and have been able to promote some forms of social cohesion. Access to basic services is also limited. The situation is even more serious in Cota 905 (Zubillaga and Caveda 2023b), where there is a high level of violence and other human rights, such as the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, property and movement, are constantly violated.

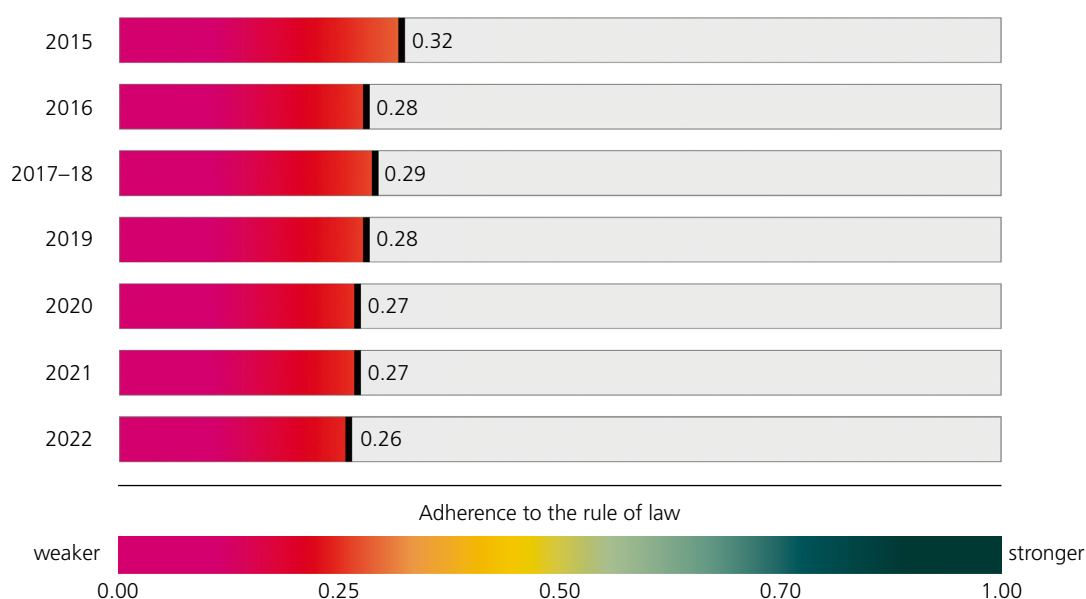
Overall, the situation of individual and collective human rights is dire and has deteriorated significantly over the past decade. The government's response has been a mixture of selective repression of prominent critics, either from the opposition or from its former allies and even the military, and attempts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis by providing patronage support conditional on some form of loyalty.

4.3 INSTITUTIONS FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Formal and informal institutions for constructive conflict transformation constitute the third pillar of peace. These institutions include state and non-state entities such as the judiciary or traditional authorities that manage interpersonal and community conflicts. In formal democracies, parliaments or community councils (should) play a role in conflict transformation, in addition to less formal dialogue processes. In the case of Venezuela at the national level, we therefore include information on the judiciary, parliament and dialogue processes between government and the opposition. In the context of war and armed conflict, where conflicts have already escalated into violence, peace agreements can also be seen as institutions for conflict transformation. In the case of Venezuela at the national level we thus include information on the judiciary, the parliament, and the dialogue processes between the government and the opposition.

Venezuela is a paradigmatic case of contestation over the »rules of the game« in the political system. Over the past two decades, Venezuela's political system has changed significantly. Until the 1980s, Venezuela was a model of political stability and one of the few countries in Latin America without a military dictatorship or civil-military regime. However, the system was unable to transform the fundamental inequalities and conflicts (see above) that led to an increase in protests, the election first of Hugo Chávez and later of Nicolás Maduro, and the transformation of the government into an authoritarian system. Both the government and the opposition undermined the legitimacy of existing institutions, either by limiting their possibilities or by creating parallel institutions – such as the introduction of a Constituent Assembly in 2017, after the opposition won control over the National Assembly with a large majority (2015–2020), or the interim presidency (2019) after Maduro's controversial second election. These policies have led to a significant decline in trust in institutions, as Latinobarómetro's surveys show when comparing 2013 and 2020. While 2013 was the first year after the death of Hugo Chávez, the most recent data is from 2020.

Figure 6:
Venezuela Overall Rule of Law Score 2015–2022



Source: World Justice Project: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2022/Venezuela%2C%20RB/>

Table 1:
Trust in Institutions

Trust in	a lot		some		little		none	
	2013	2020	2013	2020	2013	2020	2013	2020
President	33	12	17	13	16	19	34	57
Government	31	8	17	11	16	20	37	61
Congress	22	6	20	13	20	26	39	54
Political Parties	17	3	26	12	25	24	32	61
Judiciary	19	6	21	13	23	24	37	58
Church	44	48	32	24	16	15	8	13
Police	15	4	25	10	7	25	33	62
Armed Forces	32	9	23	12	20	26	25	53

Source: Latinobarometro.org 2020

Turning to other sources, the World Justice Project assesses the rule of law. In Venezuela, we see low levels of compliance with the rule of law, which continue to decline.

In our survey on perceptions of peace (see next section), we also asked whom people turn to when they cannot resolve an injustice or conflict on their own. In part, the responses reflect a lack of trust in institutions. 31.9 per cent turn to state institutions, 27.6 per cent resolve conflicts alone and 24.7 per cent turn to family, acquaintances or friends, but there are important differences between men (state 29.1%, alone 35.8%, family 24.7%) and women (state 35.1%, alone 18.3%, family 20.3%). Responses by political self-definition appear counter-intuitive: while pro-Maduro Chavistas turn

equally to the state and family (24.2%) and a majority of 30.3 per cent resolve conflicts alone, non-Maduro Chavistas turn mainly to the state (51.4%), resolve alone (16.2%) or turn to friends (10.8%). On the opposition side, those who disagree with the opposition leadership also turn to the state (41.3%), to friends (26.1%) or resolve conflicts alone (21.7%), while the opposition loyal to the leadership resolves them alone (32.6%), with family (20.9%) and only 23.3 per cent through the state. People who do not define themselves as being in favour of one side or the other also tend to resolve conflicts on their own (30.8%), with family (30.0%) and less with the state (27.5%). The high level of trust in the church and religious organisations does not mean that people turn to them to resolve injustices (2.5% of the total).

Over the last decade, a dozen attempts at dialogue processes between the government and the opposition have tried unsuccessfully to de-escalate and transform the political conflicts over the political regime, checks and balances, the modalities for free and fair elections, the growing violence, and the legitimacy of the Maduro government. These processes were shaped by different national and international contexts, but had similar content and results. With the changing international context following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Maduro government seems to be benefiting from the regional and international need to buy oil and gas. The Venezuelan opposition seems to be aware of these changes. It voted to dissolve the interim government at the end of 2022 and declared that it will participate in the next elections – probably in 2024. Civil society continues to be threatened by the ongoing humanitarian crisis and a new NGO law, in line with similar patterns of criminalisation by the authoritarian governments of Nicaragua and Russia. Thus, ten years of failed dialogues have been marked by the entanglements between multiple internal crises (political, so-

cial, migration) and the changing conjunctural international and regional environment.

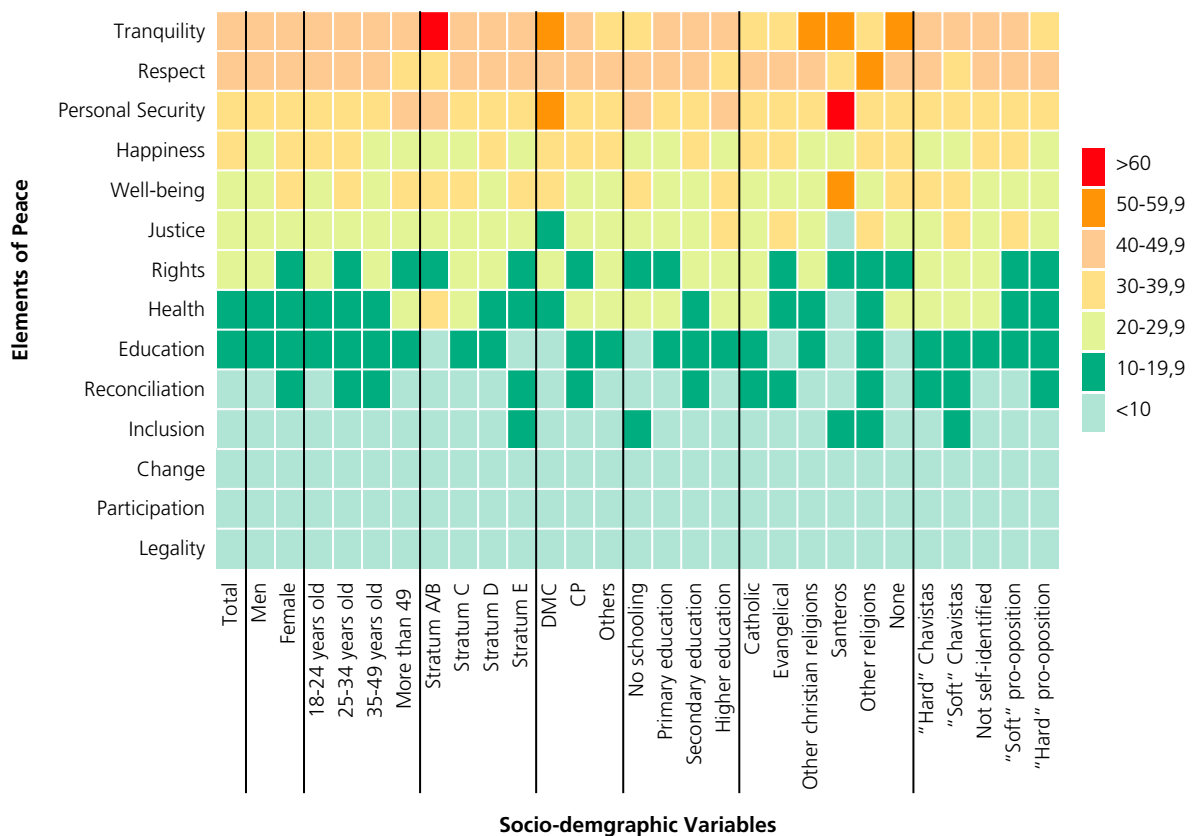
At the local level, two approaches to dialogue or negotiation can be observed. Those between the central government and the criminal organisations in the Valle del Tuy or in Cota 905 have temporarily reduced the violence, but have left the population under the violent rule of the gangs, the police, the military or paramilitary organisations, and under the threat of renewed fighting between armed actors. The civil society-led dialogue in Catuche was different. Here, mothers took the initiative to end violence between youth gangs, but the situation seems to have frozen rather than substantially transformed the underlying conflicts. This was possible because the violence was less organised and the stakes were lower than in Cota 905, where a mega-gang operated.

In the case of individual or community-based conflicts, we also see people turning to armed actors for help rather than to the state. In Valles del Tuy, Llorens and Alzualde (2023, 3) observe that »the culture of violence has penetrated to such an extent that our ethnographic research has found reports of citizens preferring to turn to criminal gang leaders rather than to official bodies to resolve conflicts at home and at school«.

Conflict transformation and a minimum consensus on underlying norms and values are sorely lacking in Venezuela. While there have been some opportunities for dialogue with international presence, no fundamental success has been achieved. In October 2023, the government and opposition signed two agreements in Barbados on the upcoming elections and a partial and temporary easing of international sanctions. Whether this will be a turning point in terms of conflict transformation, improvement of human rights and reduction of violence depends largely on implementation and developments in global politics. The need for Venezuelan oil – at least in the short term – gives the Maduro government some leverage over the US and international sanctions.

In the following section, we will explore what peace means for people in the specific context of Venezuela.

Figure 7:
Heatmap of Perceptions of Peace



Source: Survey on perceptions of peace in Venezuela (by Delphos). Based on the question: »In your opinion, what are the three MOST important components of peace?« For the analysis presented in this report, the options well-being, education, and health have been included in well-being, and the options rights and participation have been included in rights. Data weighted according to the socio-demographic structure of the municipality. Number of valid responses: 1,600

5

PERCEPTIONS OF PEACE

Our survey results reveal interesting but often slight differences between actors, especially between self-identified Chavistas and opposition members, and some variation within each group. Respondents were asked to complete the sentence: »Peace is...«. Most of the responses were words reflecting individual feelings of mental or emotional well-being. »Tranquillity« stands out, followed by »harmony« and »happiness«. More expected terms related to conflicts and basic necessities, such as »security« and »health«, are less frequently mentioned, as are terms that allude more to the relationship between actors, such as »respect«. These findings are reflected in a question that asked respondents to select the three most important elements of peace from a list of fourteen terms. The results are illustrated in the heat map (Figure 5) and show little variation across gender, age group, socio-economic level, geographical location, education level, religion and political leaning. This seems to indicate that perceptions of what constitutes peace are consistent across the different strata of Venezuelan society.

A similar result was obtained when people were asked to name the opposite of peace. Here, the most common responses were »war«, »fighting«, »conflicts«, »unrest« and »violence«. As before, we find a high level of consistency in these results across all groups. This seems to indicate that, for people in general, individual perceptions of well-being associated with the word peace are shaped by situations of direct conflict that individuals or groups of individuals face. This may be influenced by the experience of the last few years in the country. The survey also shows us that the political macro-conflict between the government and the opposition is reflected in many responses from people who identify with one side or the other. An additional analysis of the speeches and Twitter (now X) accounts of government and opposition actors reveals more pronounced differences than the survey. Nicolás Maduro and other Chavistas associate peace with his government's policies, the defence of the regime and an emphasis on social rights and participation, while opposition politicians rarely use the term peace but rather talk about democracy, justice and violence.

Analysis at the community level provides another level of meaning: despite the broad consensus on what peace is (or should be), specific contexts seem to matter. For example, the survey reveals an important difference in the importance of personal security as an element of peace. While 50.4 per

cent of respondents in the metropolitan area consider it important, only 31.3 per cent in the other capitals and 35.3 per cent in the rest of the country consider it important. This may reflect different levels of violence – higher in the capital. The results of the qualitative study show that the concepts of peace at the community level are different from those of the political actors.

In Valles del Tuy, pessimism dominates young people's answers to the question of what peace is. José Luis, thirty years old, told us: »I don't want to be pessimistic, but I think it's very difficult to talk about peace today, at least in Venezuela ... everything that happens every day is terrible, the cases that come in are terrible, and everything has two contexts: politics and money.« The more positive ideas were clearly related to private relationships and the well-being of family and friends.

In border areas, peace is linked to freedom of movement, which allows people to go about their daily business across the border. The border is seen here as something imposed and artificial, as many of these people have dual citizenship and migration flows are important in both directions – from Colombia to Venezuela in the 1990s and early 2000s and vice versa afterwards. Throughout our research at the border, the people we interviewed let us know that, from their point of view, peace is linked to the possibility of »having a roof over the heads of our families«, »feeling calm and seeing our children grow up«, »going to sleep without being afraid of what might happen« and »knowing that we can count on someone«.

Peace in the South of the Orinoco is closely linked to the guarantee of human rights for individuals and for indigenous, Afro-descendant and mestizo communities. Access to livelihoods and the different cosmovisions related to life, nature and forms of production are also mentioned. Likewise, in our conversations, the guarantee of rights was a central element in the moment of imagining alternatives for peace. In this region of the southern Orinoco, where the geographical characteristics of the territory are conducive to the concealment of crimes and human rights violations, it is essential to establish effective control mechanisms that also consider the possibility of defending the elements of the identity of the different communities and peoples that

make up the region: indigenous peoples, Afro-diaspora and mestizo communities.

In both Caracas communities, Catuche and Cota 905, the notion of peace is not only related to the private sphere, but also to specific experiences. In Catuche, this is bottom-up peacebuilding, as one interviewee explains:

»Look at us, we had so many problems and look how many years we have had since we did that, the peace commissions, and look how much it helped us and we are still here... It hasn't collapsed, there have been no deaths or anything. After so many dead children here. For me, peace is the best thing there is..., there's a reason why God wants peace.«

From the same experience comes the notion of peace as a balance between respect and tolerance for others, based on certain rules of conviviality. While in Cota 905 this is a shared goal, here the government's policy of making agreements with criminal gangs to create so-called peace zone has emptied and disqualified the concept of peace for many residents. It is a peace with a »knife at one's throat«, as one interviewee explained, or, as a young woman put it, »a peace in disguise« that justifies the violent practices of the armed groups.

These local perceptions of peace highlight the wide gap between political actors (government and opposition) and the population. The low levels of self-identification with either Chavismo or the opposition, and the 50 per cent of respondents in our survey who do not identify with either, testify to a similar trend. Disillusionment with the political status quo, the lack of hope for change and the humanitarian crisis are the main drivers of migration, a path chosen by more than 7 million Venezuelans (20% of the population). Unfortunately, we do not know what their vision of peace is.

Overall, there are strong indications that most people are very aware of the importance of human rights for peacebuilding. In our survey, 93 per cent of respondents »agree« or »strongly agree« that »respect for human rights is essential for peacebuilding«. When it comes to personal security, 36.5 per cent think it is the most important element of peace.

6

KEY ACTORS IN PEACEBUILDING

Our analysis of different national and international actors highlights the multiplicity of armed actors and the lack of actors with an explicit peacebuilding agenda. NGOs working on human rights, access to justice and humanitarian aid play an important role, as do the Catholic Church and international actors such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In terms of political actors in Venezuela, our survey also provides evidence of which actors are working for peace and who respondents consider to be important for human rights. However, the responses clearly reflect the conflict between government and opposition, while the responses on the role of churches and NGOs seem to transcend this division and could therefore be an indicator of who should be very actively involved in finding ways out of the current impasse.

From a peacebuilding perspective, international actors have played a very varied role. The US, Russia and China have focused on their economic and geopolitical interests, while European governments and international organisations such as the United Nations have played an important role, particularly in promoting human rights and supporting civil society. In the case of Latin America, positions have varied and changed according to the ideological preferences of leaders and domestic needs.

All this results in a lack of minimum consensus, both at the national and international level, on what is necessary for peacebuilding, and a lack of continuity or coordination in proposals for conflict transformation. Developments in Venezuela highlight the lack of even a minimal consensus within Venezuela, in Latin America and globally on the non-negotiable elements of civic coexistence. In all contexts, adaptation to local power relations seems to prevail. This favours the incumbent government and jeopardises civil society action, which is often dependent on external resources.

While maximalist and rigid criteria of liberal democracy may not be helpful, gradual approaches face the problem of »getting lost in transition«, i.e. leaving difficult transitions (such as the issue of transitional justice) for later and thus allowing violent actors to maintain their power and influence. Nevertheless, agreements between leaders capable of dialogue with each other and with the Venezuelan parties will be necessary to build bridges and open spaces that will allow the transition to take place. Respect for fundamental human rights, the independence of the judiciary and the implementation of agreed changes between government and opposition can open spaces for nonviolent action.

7

SPECIFICS OF PEACEBUILDING AND LESSONS LEARNED

What does the case of Venezuela teach us about the specific challenges of peacebuilding in a highly violent but non-war context? Firstly, the issue of peace is not high on the political agenda, despite the high levels of individual and collective violence and the fact that the government instrumentalises the concept of »peace« for policies of repression and militarisation. Secondly, as in other contexts, the majority of people's notions of peace are closely linked to the desire for tranquillity in everyday life. This does not mean that peace is unimportant, but rather that people seem to have more modest aspirations or a pluralist understanding in which the ability to take control of their own lives is key. Respect and personal security are also important. Although broader notions of change or transformation are rarely mentioned, the guarantee of tranquillity, respect and personal security depends on profound changes in countries like Venezuela. This broad consensus, both in our survey and in the local studies, should therefore inform and guide peacebuilding strategies.

Three axes are important: first, for people to live in peace, it is necessary to improve access to the basic necessities of food, shelter, health and education, especially for women and youth. This must be based on the rights that everyone has and not on affiliation to a particular government or political party. Second, violence by the various armed actors – state and non-state – must be reduced in »criminal« or »disguised« peace that can end overnight and sometimes generate more and new forms of violence. Finding creative ways of doing justice to the victims and holding those responsible accountable will be a difficult but necessary task. Third, spaces for social organisation and civic action need to be recovered and expanded. Peacebuilding and reconciliation must be led by civil society to be sustainable. The example of Catuche shows that this can be an important first step. These three elements are interdependent and should not be implemented one after the other, but in combination.

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