

VICTORY IN UKRAINE = ALLIES' ACCESS TO INNOVATION

By María Corina Machado, Opposition Presidential Candidate, Venezuela

Venezuela's democratic victory in 2024 will be a defeat for Russia.

For twenty-five years, under the regimes of Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro, Russia has had extraordinary influence over Venezuela.

Putin and Chávez became presidents of their countries in the same year and the two seemed to have a natural affinity. Across a great distance, they were united in their authoritarian urges.

For Chávez, Putin was a partner who could help him retain power. Today the ties between the Putin and Maduro regimes are not merely about opportunism or survival. The relationship has morphed into a pact to undermine civil society, political parties and opposition leaders in order to tilt the world order in their favor.

Through a combination of official propaganda, distorting social media posts, cyber warfare, and other covert tactics, the two nations are on a mission to undermine global democracy. Now this hybrid warfare is on expansive display in other countries of the authoritarian block.

Today Venezuela is using the wealth of natural resources to destabilize our region and erode support for the United States and its allies. The Chávez regime took a page from Putin on how to use an oil bounty to bankroll destructive forces at home and abroad. Putin might have been a pioneer in this endeavor, but Chávez was an eager pupil. He used an oil abundance to bolster power in Latin America while forging ties to Russia, Cuba, China and Iran.

For a time, the Chávez regime was able to buy

global influence without threatening its own political survival. Venezuela controls 20 per cent of worldwide oil reserves and the regime found a position of strength in the northern end of South America with tentacles across Central America and the Caribbean.

Years of corruption, ineptitude and theft have eroded Venezuela's status as an energy supplier and the regime now faces the consequences. The state-owned oil enterprise PDVSA can produce only a fraction of its earlier output and foreign receipts have dwindled.

"Years of corruption, ineptitude and theft have eroded Venezuela's status as an energy supplier and the regime now faces consequences."

Almost eight million people have been forced to flee the country due to violence, human rights violations, lack of food, shortages of medicines, hyperinflation and general violence. Venezuelans trudging to the border can see the national wreckage all around them, as they awake to the toxic myths promoted by Chávez and his successor. They can see the nation has been reduced to rubble while ruling elites have enriched themselves. There can be no doubt that this human meltdown has been caused by a dictatorship and the only solution is through political change. The longer Maduro stays, the more people are going to flee.

Predictably, the regime is using a program of lies and misinformation to offer a phoney alternative to the reality it has wrought.

These are tactics that observers of Russia and China know well. They have brazenly exploited new communication channels to promote narratives that aim to alter social consciousness. By taking hold of

Cont' d . . .

a false narrative, Russia has fostered citizens' mistrust in their institutions and manipulated democratic processes to elect actors sympathetic to Russian interests.

Venezuela has adopted Russia's brand of hybrid warfare combining clandestine tactics with brazen lies and with proxy soldiers hiding in the wings.

In Venezuela, a preposterous fiction of well-being is being churned out by AI, bots and armies of paid social media influencers. Strategically, this approach uses the vulnerabilities of open societies to weaken the system from within.

Putin used delusion to distract his people before the wanton invasion of Ukraine. Now Venezuela and Ukraine have nearly the same number of migrants and refugees and face the same deprivations. In Venezuela, the regime that learned so much from Russia is reaping the same human misery.

Nevertheless, in 2024, against all odds, we have an opportunity to change this reality. Less than a month ago, almost three million Venezuelans voted in a primary that defeated every threat and obstacle the regimen used against us. A new and robust movement was born in Venezuela on October 22, 2023. Following scrutiny by the international community for human rights violations and atrocities it has committed, the regime has lost social support and the capacity to repress.

This is the time to challenge Maduro's dictatorship in the upcoming presidential election. We need our partners to join us in support for our efforts to build a solid route to free and fair elections. Just as victory for Ukraine will diminish Russia's reach, a democratic victory in Venezuela will be a defeat for Russia and its threats to civil society - opening up opportunities for growth and innovation.



HFX