

Democratization



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Totalitarianism, kleptocracy and pandemic: the crossroads of power in Venezuela

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This chapter combines three lines of argument. The first addresses the current global trend towards the the weakening of liberal democracy, stressing that the attack on its liberal component is precisely what could prompt an eventual resurgence of totalitarian logics of power. The second second discusses the way in which said totalitarian threat has been surging in Venezuela since the beginning of the 21st century through a logic of power that is increasingly related to organized crime. Finally, some comments are made about the way in which the previous trends, considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, could evolve in current day Venezuela.

1. Global context: decline of liberal democracy and resurgence of the totalitarian threat

Today, as the third decade of the 21st century begins, there seems to be a general consensus on the downturn of liberal, modern and representative democracy. The proliferation of

“populisms”¹, “hybrid regimes”² and “authoritarian reversals”³ has been widely discussed in political sciences. In our case, we are interested in emphasizing that all these phenomena have a common denominator: the progressive consolidation of a political will that tries to escape the limits and controls of a constitutional regime, where the rights and freedoms of people are protected by the rule of the law, and the powers of the State maintain a healthy separation.

The fact that the democracy of our time necessarily has a representative, liberal and constitutional character tends to be forgotten. Ever since the constitutional debates held by the so-called “Founding Fathers” of the United States of America, concerned as they were with the recovery of a form of government that had been reviled by the tradition of Western political thought, the problem of modern democracy has been –and continues to be– tempering the fickle opinions of the popular will (be it violated or

- 1 See, for example, Kurt Weyland, “Latin America’s Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left”, *Journal of Democracy* 24 (3): 18-32, 2013; Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira, “Populism. A Very Short Introduction”, Oxford University Press, 2017; and Roger Eatwell & Matthew Goodwin, “National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy”, UK: Penguin Random House, 2018.
- 2 See Larry Diamond, “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes”, *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 21-35, April 2002; Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; and Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2017.
- 3 See Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession”, *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (1): 141-155, 2015; Marc Plattner, “Liberal Democracy’s Fading Allure”, *Journal of Democracy* 28 (4): 5-14, 2017; Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5-19, 2016; Roberto Foa & Yasha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation”. *Journal of Democracy* 28 (1): 5-15, 2017; Anna Lührmann & Staffan Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?”, *Democratization* 26 (7): 1095-1113, 2019.

even implemented by the current rulers) by putting into practice liberal principles such as the limitation and division of State powers through their institutional subjection to the rule of law.

It was possibly Tocqueville who best understood the friction between the rule of the majority and the need to subject it to the empire of a constitutional regime, a possibility that, according to him, had to be based on certain types of values and customs which favored freedom. But today, when no one dares to question the validity of the majority rule as the essence of democracy, there are many who direct their criticism towards the specifically liberal component of modern democracies. According to these, today's democracy must become more democratic and less liberal; it must empower the *demos* and detract from the powers of a State of Law that, according to them, prevents the free play of politics and the consequent advance of popular demands.

These tendencies, which can be described as illiberal or antiliberal, can be exacerbated to an initially unsuspected degree. What manifests itself through populism and hybrid regimes at relatively moderate levels, in the worst and most exceptional cases, can lead to totalitarian dynamics. In this sense, unlike what happens with many conventional or militaristic authoritarianisms –which tend to directly suppress the rule of the majority–, totalitarianism is always presented as rooted by massive popular support, and therefore it appears to embody the unappealable voice of the majority. However, the concept of totalitarianism is so associated with certain specific events that, very often, it is taken for a historical fact and not as a concept that is still active in political science and theory⁴. Sometimes its use is also reserved

4 Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "Totalitarismo: ¿un concepto vigente?", *Episteme* NS 31, (July-Dec. 2011): 45-78.

only to name a certain type of political regime, as a particularly intense form of authoritarianism, while neglecting its enormous explanatory ability to understand certain logics of power. This is often the case with numerous political scientists, often focused on providing an operational definition of totalitarianism based on a list of characteristics⁵.

The comprehensive capacity of the concept of totalitarianism is not exhausted in this variety of “check lists” offered by political science. Political philosophy –not without the help of other disciplines– has used the term to explore the deep nature of the typical discomforts of late modernity. This reveals the distressing relationship that exists between democracy and totalitarianism, a dynamic that stems from the revolutionary and modern dream of creating more egalitarian societies, but that sometimes ends up being interpreted as mere mechanical production of “new men”. This aspiration reaches the point of trying to achieve said unity through processes of social homogenization (*Gleichshaltung*) that, when promoted by certain sectors and organizations, encompass certain *endogroups* (race, class, etc.) and exonerate *exogroups* (the inferior races, class enemies, etc.). The desired goal is perfect unity, in communion with a supposed truth that is taken for absolute, and –through what Popper called a “utopian social engineering” – an experiment is conducted with human beings to achieve uniformity.

5 These typical features vary according to authors, yet usually the ones taken into account are listed by: Carl Friedrich & Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship & Autocracy*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968 [1956]; Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000; Leonard Shapiro, *Totalitarianism*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1972; and Sujian Guo, “The Totalitarian Model Revisited”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, 3 (1998): 271-285; among others.

This type of process does not take place overnight, but rather over time through the increasing predominance of certain ideas and social drives. A sort of *totalitarian logic* is generated –a mixture of beliefs, force-ideas and political practices that necessarily precede totalitarian regimes, but which, fortunately, do not always lead to their installation. The social reconfiguration that totalitarian logic seeks often derives the mechanical and linear interpretation of principles that have emerged in the context of modernity and its great revolutions. This deformation of the valuable principles of the Enlightenment seems to be related to the progressive loss of a sense of ultra-worldly transcendence, the growing prominence of the “mass-man” and the proliferation of technical means. Totalitarianism seems to express once again that “call of the tribe”⁶ or existential anguish of human individuals’ condition –not at all natural– which, for better and worse, has been promoted in the modern world. Totalitarianism embodies, so to speak, an atavistic and tribal impulse, but rationalized and technified.

Totalitarian logic tends to proscribe the intrinsic plurality of the political world, and so it promotes a fairly structured ideology, although diffuse because it needs to adjust to the words of the maximum and charismatic leader. Such an ideology is fueled by propaganda and reinforced by the more or less generalized terror that various repressive organs instill. Totalitarian repression is not usually carried out by the military, but rather is exercised through the punctual and selective actions of the secret police and

6 Pointed out by authors such as Karl Popper, *La sociedad abierta y sus enemigos* (Barcelona: Paidós Surcos, 2006 [1945]); Friedrich Hayek, *Camino de servidumbre* (Madrid: Alianza, 2007 [1944]); Ana Teresa Torres, *La herencia de la tribu* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2009); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *La llamada de la tribu*, (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2018).

paramilitary groups. As pointed out by Arendt⁷, totalitarianism always unfolds as a movement and never loses that character, which is why it does not cease in the creation of organizations parallel to the formal structure of the State and in the mobilization of political cadres and ordinary individuals. Its particular “lack of form” contrasts with the idea of those who attribute it a perfect bureaucratic organization.

Just as totalitarianism seems to emerge as a confusion of the egalitarian dream of modern revolutions, it also seems to be tied to the Promethean optimism of industrial revolutions and their inherent technical advances. Totalitarianism is expressed and exercises its dominance through the most recent technological innovations, from those related to the media and information to those related to genetic engineering and robotization, through the improvement of bureaucratic administration. The characteristic *modus* in which totalitarian domination alters our understanding of reality, distorting our ability to access information and the possibility of subjecting it to public scrutiny, is potentially verifiable today through the ease with which we deliberately spread fake news, memes, slogans and superficial ideas. What was previously achieved through centralized control of information can now be –perhaps– achieved through the adulteration of free flows of data and news. The risk involved in handling this information increases considerably when it falls into a few hands, as indicated by questions to major western networks such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. But the situation can be even worse when such control is exercised by authoritarian States such as current day China, where Western social networks are restricted, instead forcing the use of national or “autochthonous” ones (WeChat,

⁷ See Hannah Arendt, *Los orígenes del totalitarismo* (Madrid: Alianza, 2006 [1948]), 538.

QQ, QZone, Weibo, Baidu Tieba, etc.), which allow the Chinese government to collect and integrate all kinds of information about its citizens and implement biopolitical control systems over them⁸.

Why is there a disposition to fall into this type of regimes as oppressive as totalitarian ones? Possibly because they reinforce collective identities, consolidating the sense of belonging of the most fragile individuals to a community. The feeling of protection that this generates, together with the reduction of the weight of individual responsibility, is accompanied by campaigns directed against scapegoats, alleged causes of all ills. This ends up being sufficient incentive to cede absolute control to the State. The logic “*dello Stato totale*” –as Mussolini liked to say– is usually applauded by those who consider that only the State will be able to offer happiness, a happiness that is apparently prevented only by others, the same ones that must be submitted or eliminated.

The 1930s remind us how the great collective frustrations and the search for massive protection –apparently provided by the mobilization and the force deployments of the *squadristi* and by strong and omnipresent States– are the best fuels for totalitarian temptation. At that time, the aftermath of the First World War and the so-called “Spanish flu”, the great inflations and the Great Depression, as well as the massive demand for State protection and the discrediting of liberal ideas, not only led to the rise of nationalist, populist and authoritarian movements and leaders in

⁸ Larry Diamond, when speaking of a possible “post-modern totalitarianism”, states: “What if a government not only wants to know everything there is to know digitally about all its citizens, but also has the means to collect it and analyze it? That, increasingly, is the Orwellian world which we are entering”. In “The Road to Digital Unfreedom. The Threat of Postmodern Totalitarianism”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, 1 (January 2019): 22.

various countries, but also of the first totalitarian regimes. At that time, the aspiration for social equality and the idea of inalienable rights were already deeply rooted in the population, but the results were still far from having substantially improved the living conditions of broad layers of the population. Under such conditions, the strength and protection that the State seemed to offer, erected as a new tribal binder, seemed almost irresistible. The results of such dynamics are the main political lessons that the 20th century has left us. However, the temptation to stumble over the same stones is still present and seems to have been recently renewed.

2. Nature of the regime in Venezuela: totalitarian and gangster logic

Talking about totalitarianism in today's Venezuela may be puzzling at a first glance. However, there are good grounds for this. On the one hand, the characterization of Chavismo has always been problematic, given that this movement-regime has gone through different phases and shown different facades over time. Indeed, Chavismo has embodied issues as varied as a conspiracy military lodge, a populist and/or multi-class electoral coalition, a revolutionary movement, a hegemonic socialist party, a military establishment government, etc. That changing and multifaceted character is what has led to multiple characterizations by social scientists, each of which has tended to highlight certain traits that are present (populists, militarists, revolutionaries, socialists, etc). From our point of view, none of these characterizations has, by itself, fully accounted for the deepest and most essential nature of the Chavista phenomenon.

We consider that all these denominations can be understood as parts of a *totalitarian logic* that has continued to unfold over time, understanding this concept as has been exposed in previous pages. A review of the various totalitarian regimes that have existed to date shows those same features combined within the same logic of univocal, distinctive and particular power in almost all of them. This logic is characterized by a treatment that is increasingly less attentive to human and citizen dignity, less respectful of personal freedom, and more oriented towards exhaustive control of the population which is made possible through ideology, State capacities, various technical resources, and the standardizing of wills. For totalitarianism, the acquiescence of the population is not enough: it seeks fervent adherence and its constant mobilization. Individuals, as well as any gesture derived from their moral autonomy, are suffocated under the weight of totalitarian homogenization, which advances as it destroys the uses, customs, associations and institutions of society. Even after taking control of the State, totalitarianism never stops working as a movement, since its nature is to project itself incessantly towards a mythical or utopian stage never quite achievable⁹. Additionally, the foreign policy of a regime of these characteristics is usually expansive and challenging, equivalent to that of a *revolutionary state*¹⁰ and oriented towards the imposition of new international

9 Zdenek Mylnář states that authentic totalitarianism is established when the unlimited use of terror no longer has a reason for being, that is, when individuals have completely lost their autonomy. Heteronomy is now pursued “cybernetically”, interrupting the flow of information about both the outside world and the past, but overly tolerating intersubjective relationships only when they occur through power-controlled circuits. Cited by Simona Forti in *Totalitarismo: trayectoria de una idea límite* (Barcelona: Herder, 2008), 112.

10 See David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University

standards, with which it is likely to be involved in visible diplomatic conflicts.

The characteristic features of totalitarianism provided by various authors in the field of political science have been summarized by Simona Forti¹¹. Virtually all these features are present in the Bolivarian Revolution's Venezuela, as embodied in the "nationalist, Bolivarian and socialist" (or national-socialist, in a certain sense) ideology; the presence of a clearly hegemonic party (PSUV); the role that Hugo Chavez's charismatic leadership

Press, 1993); and Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "La revolución iliberal venezolana y su política exterior", *Análisis Político* 77, 1 (2013): 211-231.

- 11 These characteristic features are: a) a dominant, revolutionary ideology, which expresses its faith in the necessary laws of history, and which proclaims the destruction of an old order and the emergence of another, radically new and pure; b) a partisan structure, led by a charismatic leader who declares himself infallible and demands an unconditional adherence by the masses; c) a chaotic redesign of positions and roles to generate rivalry and, therefore, dependence on the true seat of power; d) a collective economic system (capitalist or socialist), whose objective is to align the productive forces with the regime's autarchic and militaristic goals; e) total control over the mass media and the formulation of a rhetoric aimed at avoiding ambivalences or complexities; f) a permanent mobilization of the population through wars, conflicts or purges; g) the widespread use of terror through a secret police with the aim of isolating, intimidating and aligning any person or group that the regime perceives as a threat; h) the centrality of the objective enemy. Along the same lines, the persecution and elimination not only of real opponents but also, more clearly, of categories of people considered perverse by virtue of a certain established quality, such as their race or ancestry. Crimes against the State do not necessarily have to have been committed by the person accused of them; i) concentration camps, as a laboratory of totalitarian domination, as spaces to experiment under which conditions human beings become completely malleable. Additionally, a slave labor regime coexists with a policy of genocide of a racial or class character. In Simona Forti, *Totalitarismo, filosofía y biopolítica*, lecture delivered at the Centro de Estudios Públicos (Santiago de Chile, November 25, 2015), 131.

played for years; a “utopian social engineering” and the proliferation of official instances by the regime, often parallel to other existing structures; the economic model implemented (with increasing centralized control of the price system and of all instances of production and marketing of goods); the virtual monopoly of the media (through official, expropriated or co-opted means), through which direct or indirect control is exercised; the constant mobilization of the population in manifestations, countermanifestations, concentrations and militia training; terror caused by clandestine or secret actions by various security forces (FAES, CICPC, SEBIN, etc.); the hostile rhetoric from the State against various groups of the population, whether or not they are politically adverse to the regime; the presence of detention centers in which prisoners (usually political prisoners) are subjected to extreme conditions (“La Tumba”, etc.); and a labor regime under which the effort of the worker does not maintain any acceptable relation with their remuneration, stimulating emigration and displacement among millions of people.

By virtue of these and other lines of thought (not only of a nomothetic-analytical nature, but also ideographic-hermeneutic), the argument that affirms the totalitarian character of the Venezuelan regime of the last two decades has been sustained and developed –with important variations in each case– by various Venezuelan academics¹². In fact, at the time these paper

12 Carlos Kohn & Rodolfo Rico (comp.), *El totalitarismo del siglo XXI. Una aproximación desde Hannah Arendt* (Vicerrectorado Académico de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2009); Francisco Plaza, *El silencio de la democracia* (Caracas: CEC, Los Libros de El Nacional, 2010); Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, *ibidem*, 2011; Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, *Apaciguamiento. El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2012); Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, “Democracia totalitaria: apuntes desde el caso venezolano”, in *El lugar de la gente. Comunicación, espacio público y democracia deliberativa en*

is being written, the totalitarian character of this domination seems to have reached the level indicated by Mylnař in the aforementioned fragment in certain sectors of the population. However, the recent proliferation of characterizations that allude to the Chavista regime as *gangster*, *kleptocratic* or *mafia* is based on increasingly abundant evidence, with which it seems necessary to ask whether the Bolivarian Revolution is essentially a gangster rather than a totalitarian regime. From our point of view, this question is best answered if, instead of seeking a characterization of *political regimes*, one understands rather the type of *power logics* prevailing in either case. Given that the concept of *totalitarian logic of power* has been explained in previous pages, it is now necessary to outline what we understand by *mafia*, *gangster* or a *criminal logic of power* (that is, that exercised by those in charge of gangster or kleptocratic States)¹³. It is useful to be guided by ideal types that allow highlighting differences and characterizing schematically. Such ideal types are synthesized in Table 1.

Venezuela, ed Carlos Delgado Flores (Caracas: Ediciones de la UCAB, 2014), 15-31; Miguel Albuja, "El neototalitarismo en el escenario político latinoamericano: nuevas tecnologías hegemónicas de control, terrorismo y conspiración", *Episteme NS* 33, 2 (2013): 89-110; Ariel Segal, "Totalitarismo, dictadura y autoritarismo: Definiciones y re-definiciones", *Revista gobierno y gestión pública* 1,1 (2013): 1-37; José Javier Blanco, "El poder totalitario, el caso de la revolución bolivariana", *Revista MAD* 34 (2016): 65-105; José Javier Blanco, *Repensando la teoría política del totalitarismo* (Caracas: Equinoccio, 2019). Meanwhile, Humberto García Larralde, in "El fascismo del siglo XXI. La amenaza totalitaria del proyecto político de Hugo Chávez Frías" (Caracas: Debate, 2009) considers the regime created by Hugo Chávez as "neo-fascist", arguing that its alleged leftist or progressive character is not truly such.

13 For a complete characterization of these regimes, see Katherine Hirschfeld, *Gangster States. Organized Crime, Kleptocracy and Political Collapse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Table 1: Comparison of totalitarian and mafia power logics

Context	Totalitarian logic	Mafia logic
Political performance	Strong ideological burden. Presence of a maximum and messianic leader. Tries to reach a single-party situation. High levels of mobilization.	Ideological burden not necessarily high. More diffuse leadership. Cooptation of the opposition; it does not need a single party. Low mobilization.
Administrative activities	Proliferation of parastatal institutions. Centralization of decisions. "Utopian social engineering" (Popper, 2006).	Co-opting, through bribery or extortion, of public officials. Neglect of all things unprofitable.
Social goals	Search for homogenization (<i>Gleichschaltung</i>) that eliminates individual autonomy.	It focuses on the control and exploitation of the population. Predatory attitude.
Economic policies	Control and centralization of economic processes. An anti-utilitarian character that seems irrational often prevails.	Creation of "gray areas", suitable for undue profit. State operates as a large set of extractive <i>alcabalas</i>
Attitude towards legal aspects	A constant legitimization of his political project is proposed by legal means. It is accompanied by a certain "constitutive drive".	It is enough for him to give an appearance of legality to his acts. It accommodates the functioning of the judicial system to specific objectives.

Police-Military	It seeks to develop a respectable military capacity, which usually includes civilian or para-military militias. Secret police is essential.	It tends to create "private armies", thus risking the loss of the State's monopoly on violence. Often several "capos" arise.
Foreign policy	"Extroverted", typical of revolutionary states (Armstrong, 1993). Violent uses and poses new dynamics to the other states. It tends to promote diplomatic conflicts due to its tendency to expand its control.	Rather "discreet", it protects the overlapping creation of links of transnational organized crime under the protection of state sovereignty. It can give rise to diffuse conflicts, generally of medium or low intensity.

Source: own elaboration.

Initially, it should be noted that mafia logic is distinguished from totalitarian logic by its low ideological burden, as well as by the fact that its main motivation –purely utilitarian– is profit and not the creation of a “new society” based on an ideology. In mafia logic, any attitude towards justice, the common good or a certain political position is rather instrumental. The legitimate regulatory function of the State is used as a mechanism of undue coercion and as a convenient cloak of legality, to the point that public security organs come to function *de facto* as true armed sectors of the particular groups that control the public. Similarly, the State apparatus degenerates into an immense set of *alcabalas*, ideal to fleece the common citizen. Corrupted public officials of all ranks, with no limits other than their own rivalries, coordinate to design a legislative and bureaucratic framework conducive to

committing lucrative crimes, such as extortion, smuggling and collusion.

The mafia logic, therefore, is oriented towards the creation of “gray areas”¹⁴ in which the border between legality and illegality is not always clear, which is very convenient for organized crime actions. This logic is less concerned than the totalitarian logic with the formation of a single party, to the point that it may even be convenient for it to exist, co-opt and control various sectors of the political opposition. Rather than centralizing economic functions, the mafia regime is interested in an exploitation regime that can contemplate cooperation between corrupt private and public sectors. Meanwhile, the administration of public services is often neglected, with the understanding that the population will be willing to pay additionally for each service they do not receive on a regular basis. In the worst case, security forces and paramilitaries function more as “private armies” than as public organs.

It is clear that mafias can operate in both democratic and autocratic States. However, democratic and even autocratic States tend to persecute and punish organized crime organizations because they violate their authority (forcing them to operate in the shade and with maximum secrecy). Meanwhile, the organs of public power in a mafia State are controlled by gangster logic: the leaders themselves –whether they have been popularly elected or not– are integrated into the criminal plot and so it becomes a State-run operation. Not only do criminals no longer face any persecution or harassment by internal organs or actors

14 The notion has been used by Gaïdz Minassian, *Zones grises. Quand les États perdent le contrôle* (Paris: Autrement, 2011); and by Pierre Pascallon, *Les zones grises dans le monde aujourd'hui* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2016).

with political power, but they even develop an open rhetoric of threat and extortion as an essential part of their public discourse. When a voluminous State apparatus –and/or what Popper called “closed societies”¹⁵– is added to the condition of mafia or gangster State, the mechanisms of looting increase significantly compared to what happens in open societies or smaller States.

Generally, this extreme is only reached after the progressive involvement of the gangster State in transnational mafia, especially when it comes to rather small countries. It is a situation that is repeated, particularly, in several of the multiple nations that emerged after the decolonization processes in the middle of the 20th century or after the collapse of the USSR. Hence, the foreign policy of a mafia regime is oriented towards cultivating the links of transnational organized crime under the protective cloak of national sovereignty. Unlike what happens with totalitarianism, the leaders of a gangster state are not usually interested in the possibility of being involved in international conflicts, although the nature of their activities –violating international law and multiple uses and widely shared customs– tends to generate a diffuse and low-intensity conflict with other countries.

All this begs the question about the true character of the Chavista regime (totalitarian or gangster?): Is the power logic of the Bolivarian Revolution primarily oriented towards a process of suppression of pluralism, social homogenization and annulment of citizens’ autonomy to consolidate a single project of power (totalitarian logic), or rather towards the articulation of forces and interests focused primarily on undue profit and the extraction/accumulation of wealth (gangster logic)? (As we will see later, the answer to this question is equivalent to determining whether

¹⁵ Karl Popper, *ibidem*, 2006.

any properly political will prevails in the current Venezuelan regime, or whether there is a drive based purely on the profit of the ruling elite. We will take it one step at a time).

Determining with certainty to which logic the Venezuelan regime responds with greater force would be the subject of a detailed study, expressly developed in relation to the previous variables and according to a specific methodology. However, the continuous and detailed study of current Venezuelan reality, supported by multiple specialists in various areas, allows several preliminary conjectures to be made. First, it is clear that the regime established by Chavismo shows characteristics of these two logics of power. Now, while the characteristics of a totalitarian logic seemed to predominate during Hugo Chávez's government (1999-2012), the elements of a mafia logic are the most visible during Nicolás Maduro's period (2013-2019). Purely "political" behaviors, such as the emphasis on "Bolivarian-socialist" ideology or on revolutionary diplomatic activity, seemed to have a comparatively greater weight during Chávez's government, while the growing denunciations of Chavismo associations with transnational organized crime have proliferated, especially during Maduro's stay in power. The general trend therefore seems to point to the progressive disarticulation of the institutional, social and cultural framework of the nation, increasingly replaced by parallel organizations related to the party-State and by multiple "gray areas" in which –as has been pointed out by various authors– drug trafficking, smuggling, extortion, kidnapping, money laundering and the indiscriminate extraction of natural resources proliferate¹⁶.

16 Several sources can be consulted on the matter: Paola Bautista, "Revolución Bolivariana y el desarrollo del Estado gangsteril en Venezuela", in *Democratización* 1, 1 (2019): 50-75; Emili Blasco, *Bumerán Chávez. Los fraudes que llevaron al colapso de Venezuela* (Madrid: CreateSpace

Now, from our point of view, the undoubted presence and consolidation of this criminal logic in recent years not only does not contradict the effective influence of the totalitarian logic referred to here, but could even be a consequence. This is explained by the dissolving impact that totalitarian logic has on the State's structure, institutions and society, a dissolution that is particularly evident in post-totalitarian States¹⁷, where all kinds of organized crime logic and actions tend to proliferate.

Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Leonardo Coutinho, *Hugo Chávez, o espectro* (São Paulo: Vestígio, 2018); Crisis Group, "73 Report Latin America & Caribbean - Gold and Grief in the Venezuela's Violent South" (February 28, 2019); Douglas Farah & Caitlin Yates, "Maduro's Last Stand. Venezuela's Survival Through the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise" (IBI Consultants, LLC and National Defense University INSS, 2019); Insight Crime, "Venezuela: A Mafia State?" (2018); John Polga-Hecimovich, "Organized Crime and the State in Venezuela under Chavismo", in Jonathan Rosen, Bruce Bagley & Jorge Chabat (eds), *The Criminalization of States. The Relationship between States and Organized Crime* (Lexington Books, 2019), 189-207; Geoff Ramsey & David Smilde, "Beyond the Narcostate Narrative: What U.S. Drug Trade Monitoring Data Says About Venezuela", Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), (March 11, 2020); Moisés Rendón & Arianna Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela" (Washington: Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 22, 2019); Antulio Rosales, "Venezuela's Deepening Logic of Extraction", *NACLA Report on the Americas* 49, 2 (2017): 132-135; and Marcos Tarre, "Seguridad Ciudadana", in Benigno Alarcón & Sócrates Ramírez (eds), *La consolidación de una transición democrática. El desafío venezolano III* (Caracas: UCAB Ediciones, 2018).

¹⁷ Forti (*ibidem*, 2008: 105) stated that, according to Walzer, if some elements revealed by "classic" authors are taken seriously –the permanent mobilization adopted by totalitarian terror, the tendency to totally destroy reality–, one must necessarily conclude that totalitarianisms are sinking due to an inevitable entropic force. They must necessarily transform into something less intense. To understand the specific case that Russia embodies regarding this post-totalitarian dynamic, see also Masha Gessen, *The Future is History. How Totalitarianism reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverheads Books, 2017).

At times, it has been thought that totalitarianism is characterized by its supposed ability to establish a centralized and absolute order, when in reality it is characterized by its “lack of structure” –something to which we have already referred, citing Arendt–. The concrete effect of this model of domination is not only the dislocation of the function of the law and the breakdown of the traditional mechanisms of citizen association, but the fact that the State becomes completely permeated by logics that, far from responding to the public-private division, rather empower those who manage public issues to infiltrate within the most intimate dimensions of private issues, while at the same time using the public to serve themselves in purely particular terms.

Once the institutions of civil society are destroyed, neutralized, or co-opted, and the population’s capacity to react is suppressed, there is nothing to prevent the elites of the totalitarian party-State from abusing the extraordinary control acquired to procure a purely criminal profit, evading all responsibility regarding citizen welfare and acting as if they were *superfluous*¹⁸. It is extreme that the very notion of criminality –that which violates the law and the morality that it seeks to embody– loses its social meaning, while its reason for being is altered. It is well known that the disappearance of the rule of law, the regime of liberties and effective access to justice creates ideal conditions for the proliferation of regimes linked to crime¹⁹, an inference that seems to be reinforced once the gangster nature is recognized as a characteristic of several

18 The expression is taken from Arendt; see Arendt, *ibidem*, 2006.

19 As stated by Hung-En Sung, “State Failure, Economic Failure, and Predatory Organized Crime: A Comparative Analysis”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 41, 2 (2004): 111-129; and Jessica West, “The Political Economy of Organized Crime and State Failure: The Nexus of Greed, Need and Grievance”, *Innovations: A Journal of Politics* 6 (2006): 1-17.

countries that usually occupy the lowest positions in the Freedom House and Transparency International indices.

Consequently, a general hypothesis is proposed (whose verification could lead to a line of research), according to which *the evolution and decline of totalitarian regimes, evident in late totalitarian or post-totalitarian societies, generate conditions particularly prone to the proliferation of power logics characteristic of gangster or mafia States*. Is it an exclusive pattern of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution? Not precisely. Various studies on diverse cases in Eastern Europe, especially in Putin's Russia²⁰, abound in the characterization of the criminal and mafia dynamics that have become more sophisticated in these countries during and after the fall of communism²¹. Likewise, the several times denounced relationship between the Castro regime and drug trafficking²², or the complex money laundering schemes in which the North Korean regime apparently is involved²³, draw attention to the concomitant logics between totalitarian logics and gangster logics.

20 For example, James Finckenauer & Yuri Vorodin, "The Threat of Organized Russian Crime", (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2001); Julián López Muñoz, "Criminalidad organizada. La mafia rusa y su estrategia de expansión" (Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), 2015); Masha Gessen, *ibidem* 2017.

21 There are several similarities between the Russian and Venezuelan cases: cooperation between State officials and organized crime bosses; the "political" role played by the Russian *vory v zakone* and the Venezuelan *pranes*; and some actions carried out by organized crime agents who migrate to other countries.

22 See Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *La conexión cubana. Narcotráfico, contrabando y juego en Cuba entre los años 20 y comienzos de la Revolución* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colección CES, 2005).

23 For example, Jay Solomon & Jason Dean "Heroin Busts Point to Source of Funds for North Koreans", *Wall Street Journal* (April 23, 2003) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB105106006946882000> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

The foregoing becomes more explanatory for the Venezuelan case when certain “dirty business models” developed by the military in Venezuela²⁴ appear to be related or even to have been directly imported from countries such as Cuba or Russia²⁵. Just as it is not contradictory to characterize the Venezuelan regime as essentially totalitarian regarding its populist, militaristic, revolutionary or hybrid facets, it is also not necessarily contradictory to characterize it as a mafia or gangster regime, precisely because the totalitarian character integrates all those phenomena and behavior contrary to democracy, liberties and the rule of law.

There is still a pending question: *which elements are essential and which ones are instrumental in the relationship between totalitarian logic and mafia logic, in other words, between political will and profit drive in the Venezuelan case*. The previous dilemma is posed here based on what Saint Augustine already anticipated when detecting the fine line that exists between politics and organized crime²⁶. Politics,

24 As a recent example, you can consult the report: “Venezuela Military Head has Links to Companies, Real Estate in U.S., Venezuela worth Millions”, *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article241970616.html> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

25 To further on these relations with Cuba and Russia, you can consult, respectively: María Werlau, *Cuba’s Intervention in Venezuela: A Strategic Occupation with Global Implications* (USA: Neo Club Ediciones, 2019); and Alejandro Cardozo & Víctor Mijares, “Los lazos de corrupción entre Rusia y Venezuela. Una alianza con otros medios”, *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, 19, 2 (2019): 64-74.

26 Paraphrasing Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, chapter 4, book IV: If we remove justice from governments, what do they become if not large-scale robber gangs? And these bands, what are they but small kingdoms? They are a group of men, they are ruled by a boss, they commit themselves in a mutual pact, they distribute the loot according to the law accepted by them.

beyond involving the willingness to exercise coercion, always revolves around some idea of justice, however precarious it may be; without it, the political community falls apart. Otherwise, it is an organization of a non-political nature. Criminal associations tend to be ephemeral because they are united only by the desire for undue profit, but those that last over time have come to be classified as proto-states, since they are articulated around codes of honor, practices of solidarity and relatively stable rules that allow them to rival the current political order.

Regarding the case at hand –that of the Bolivarian Revolution–, the task of solving the proposed dilemma exceeds the objectives set forth in this paper. For the moment, it is enough to state it, and to indicate the existence of this tension between two logics of power that, despite their differences, are not necessarily contradictory. In this sense, and depending on how this relationship is assumed, two fundamental possibilities emerge to describe the current situation in Venezuela. On the one hand, 1) if the mafia prevails over the totalitarian logic, the country could experience the progressive decline towards a phase of post-totalitarian features, a stage that if not translated into a change of regime –or at least in the recovery of the centrality of some kind of political logic– could lead the country towards a condition that combines features of a failed and gangster State. On the other hand, it could rather be the case that: 2) totalitarian logic prevails over mafia or gangsters; if so, instead of representing the essence of the Chavista regime, the mafia logic would play a rather instrumental role, useful for achieving the political objectives of the regime. This would not be a progressive decline of totalitarian logic, but rather a phase of its consolidation through mechanisms of organized crime²⁷.

27 An important reference to understand the type of rationality that could characterize a State of these characteristics is the famous book of Yehezkel

3. The global situation: eventual incidence of the pandemic on Venezuela

The ubiquitous threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic has awakened –or deepened– in various parts of the world the potentially totalitarian temptation to resort to all kinds of technical means to exercise domination that, in certain cases, extends to biopolitical control. The sanitary convenience of tracking people infected with this coronavirus, as well as the need to decree quarantines, have opened the doors for many governments to implement measures that clearly restrict individual freedoms. Similarly, the more or less widespread desire for public health systems capable of neutralizing the pandemic seems to have fueled, in several countries, the discourse of political actors demanding tax increases, greater powers for the states, and even expropriations of private assets.

This happens precisely at a time when the world is already experiencing a sustained drift towards the gorges of populism, hybrid regimes and authoritarian reversals. However, it is known that, in the face of imminent threats and of the proliferation of growing but unsatisfied expectations, societies tend to sacrifice freedom and autonomy in exchange for protection and security; that is, after all, the most elementary reason of being for the State, according to Hobbesian theory. Thus, the pandemic emergency is triggering a wave of claims in favor of State intervention, assumed as a savior and almighty. This trend has triggered arduous debates in various liberal democracies, while it represents the perfect opportunity for authoritarian governments to increase the abusive controls they already exert on the population.

Dror, *Crazy States. A Counterconventional Strategic Problem* (New York: Klaus Reprint, 1980 [1971]).

The latter seems to be the case in Venezuela in 2020. The official response to the pandemic threat –virtually impossible for a health care system in a country with a hospital network that has been greatly diminished as a result of the erratic policies of the Bolivarian Revolution– has focused on keeping people confined in their homes, as well as trying to block independent information mechanisms. It is obvious that such an approach to the crisis generates a particularly risky situation for those infected with COVID-19, an even greater risk than that already experienced by patients from other countries in somewhat more stable conditions. It is politically beneficial for a regime that needs to prevent interaction, organization and mobilization of a population notoriously dissatisfied with the –frankly deplorable– living conditions in which it has been subsisting.

The repressive and atomizing effect of these policies is increased by the already chronic inability to access the basic food basket that most of the population experiences²⁸, as well as by the increasing fuel shortage. It is truly paradoxical that, in an oil-generating country like Venezuela, the production of gasoline and diesel has been sustainedly declining, due to the structural deterioration of the hydrocarbon industry, irregular schemes of association with foreign companies, and US sanctions imposed since 2019 to PDVSA, the State-owned oil company.

28 According to the *Centro de Documentación y Análisis Social de la Federación Venezolana de Maestros* (CENDAS), the price of the family food basket in January 2020 increased 58.3% compared to the previous month, requiring 96.5 minimum wages to acquire it, while the minimum wage was at \$ 3.28 per month. See “Cendas-FVM: Canasta Básica Familiar de enero 2020 fue de Bs 24.139.128,44 (\$317,62)”, *Finanzas Digital*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.finanzasdigital.com/2020/02/cendas-fvm-canasta-basica-familiar-de-enero-2020-fue-bs-24-139-12844-31762/> (consulted April 19, 2020).

The pandemic arrives in Venezuela at a time when the country has already been experiencing a complex humanitarian crisis for several years –marked by the collapse of public services, the sustained economic debacle, the proliferation of organized crime and one of the biggest processes of emigration/displacement registered in the continent²⁹–, and in the midst of what some specialists call “multiple sovereignty”³⁰, that is, the struggle of two political forces to abrogate the State monopoly of the legitimate government. Each one of them, Juan Guaidó and Nicolás Maduro, has been recognized by an important group of foreign governments. While more than 50 democracies support the former, the latter is backed by very powerful autocratic governments and the effective use of armed force.

Despite the fact that on various occasions several negotiation schemes have been proposed between the opposing sides, so far none of them has produced significant results, beyond some escalation of the conflict on certain occasions. This is partly because the Venezuelan conflict is strongly linked to complex and antagonistic geopolitical agendas, corresponding not only to major powers such as the US, Russia and China, but also to countries with a more modest but strong global influence in the case of Venezuela (Cuba, Iran, Turkey, Colombia, Brazil, Great Britain and several other EU nations, such as France, Italy, Germany or Spain). As the agreement between these countries

29 By April 2020, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, as reported by host governments and recorded by the Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, whose figures are used by UNHCR, amounted to 5,093,987 Venezuelans abroad. See <https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

30 The concept, derived from Trotsky’s notion of “dual power”, is used by Charles Tilly; see *Las revoluciones europeas, 1492-1992*, Barcelona: Crítica, 1995.

has become impossible, the options for a negotiated exit within the country have also been complicated.

Likewise, the possibilities that the catastrophic social situation fuels a new great cycle of protests potentially capable of inducing a profound change in the political situation seem uncertain. Specialized literature considers this type of outbreak to be more likely in middle-income societies, with high expectations combined with an abrupt drop in purchasing power and a large proportion of unemployed young people³¹. This seemed to be the case in Venezuela in 2012-2018³², a period during which there were indeed two great cycles of protest (2014 and 2017) and consequent opportunities for political change. However, since then Venezuelan society has become brutally impoverished, and the average age of the population residing in the country seems to be declining –a consequence of the emigration of millions of young people and the working force–, with which the country enters a dangerous condition of extreme poverty that would be negatively related to the possibility of producing large protests with political impact³³. Additionally, the totalitarian logics of domination that have been exercised for years have had a strong impact on all kinds of political and intermediate associations in Venezuela (political parties, companies, civil associations, etc.), severely damaging the people's capacities to exercise autonomous collective actions with

31 See Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970); and Jack A. Goldstone (ed.), *Revolutions. Theoretical, Comparative and Historical Studies* (Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thompson, 2003).

32 For example, Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "Cambio político en Venezuela 2013-2016: ¿transición, estado fallido o profundización revolucionaria?", in Benigno Alarcón & Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci (editores), *El desafío venezolano II: Transición democrática o autocratización revolucionaria* (Caracas: UCAB Ediciones, 2016) ,99-140.

33 See Paul Collier, *Guerra en el club de la miseria* (Madrid: Turner Noema, 2009).

potential impact on the political scene. Hence, from 2018 to date, the greatest pressure exerted on Maduro's regime of totalitarian vocation has come, mainly, from foreign governments such as the US, Canada and countries from the Lima Group and the European Union, rather than internal pressures.

At the moment, the trend towards demobilization of the population has only increased –not only in Venezuela, but worldwide– during the pandemic crisis, which is still an important opportunity for autocratic regimes³⁴. Our tentative and conjunctural conclusion, therefore, is that the current crossroads of power in Venezuela (in which totalitarian and kleptocratic logics intersect in the midst of a global context marked by a generalized democratic reversal and a pandemic of great proportions) does not offer neither clear trends nor perspectives for a political change favorable to the redemocratization of the country. Fortunately, politics is the empire of contingency; the area where –more than in any other– will and fortune often work miracles. Now, more than ever, it is time to overcome adverse circumstances.

34 See Samuel Brannen, "Will Covid-19 End the Age of Mass Protests?" (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 7, 2020). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-covid-19-end-age-mass-protests> (consulted on April 19, 2020).