

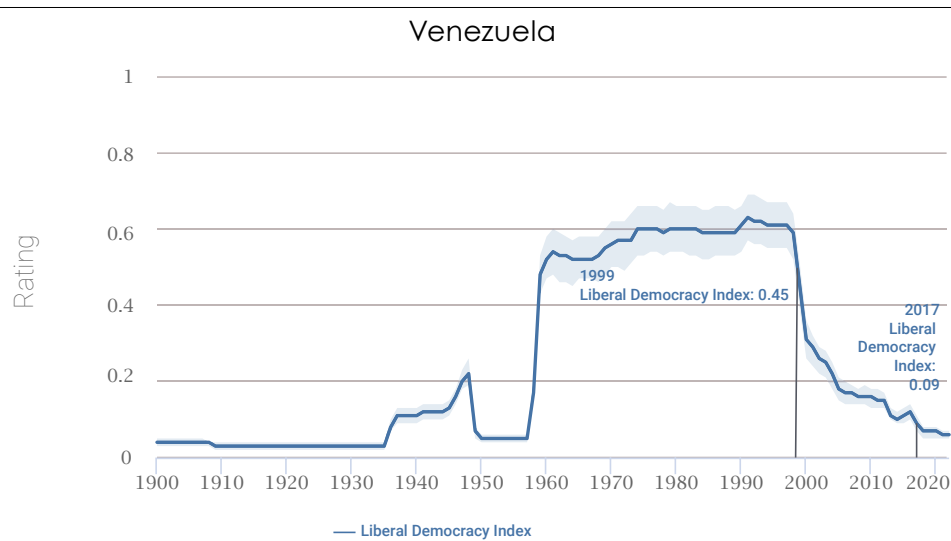
# Campaign Coverage in Authoritarian Contexts. The Venezuelan Case 2013-2022

Maru Morales P.

In 2017, Venezuela left behind any vestige of the electoral democracy model that governed the country with ups and downs between 1958 and 1998, which might still have persisted by that year. Since then, the country has fully entered an electoral autocracy with characteristics of a closed autocracy, according to the parameters established by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).

The V-Dem Institute, based in Sweden, is directed and composed of the most prominent political scientists and researchers in Political and Social Science in the Western world. Their Index on the state of Democracy in the world is one of the indicators associated with the functioning of democracy, which has been published annually since 2017. This indicator measures the electoral and liberal components of democracies, classifying countries from the lowest (0) to the highest (1) level of democracy.

Venezuela's most prominent academic figures in Political Science refer to V-Dem indicators in their research on Venezuela's political regime and the necessary variables for a transition to democracy.



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 13

Figure 1. V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Scale 0 = autocracy; 1 = democracy. Obtained April 21, 2023 in [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/VariableGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/).

As mentioned in a previous article<sup>1</sup> concerning the right to freedom of expression between 1999 and 2012, the four categories used by V-Dem to classify political systems are as follows:

- **Liberal democracy**, where there is full functioning of rights, duties, guarantees, and democratic institutions;
- **Electoral democracy**, where institutions function, and there are free elections, but there are limitations on the exercise of some rights;
- **Electoral autocracy**, where institutions, elections, and the enjoyment of rights are conditioned and only serve to ensure the permanence of a political group in power;

1 Maru Morales P., "Venezuelan Journalists and Media in Resistance", *Democratization*, 5, No 26. <https://red-forma.com/democratizacion-26/>

- And **closed autocracy**, where there are no elections, rights, or independent institutions that protect citizens.

When we look at the evolution of the Liberal Democracy Index for Venezuela from 1959 to 2022, on the mentioned scale of 0 to 1, we find the following:

- Between 1958 and 1998, Venezuela recorded an average of 0.56, meaning it kept the parameters of an electoral democracy that timidly pointed towards liberal democracy in the 1990s, reaching a score of up to 0.63 in 1991.
- Between 1999 and 2022, the average of this indicator for Venezuela was 0.16, clearly within the features of an electoral autocracy.
- During Hugo Chávez's period (1999-2012), the indicator was 0.22.
- During Nicolás Maduro's period (2013-2022), the average was 0.08, almost reaching the 0.05 recorded during the dictatorship that ruled from November 1948 to January 1958.

This index, according to V-Dem's explanation, captures the level of protection of individual and minority rights against both the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. In this parameter, the democratic or autocratic quality of the political system is measured by the constraints under which the government operates. These constraints are achieved with a balanced presence of constitutionally protected civil liberties, a

strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that limit the exercise of executive power.

Este índice, de acuerdo a la explicación de V-Dem, recoge el nivel de protección de los derechos de los individuos y las minorías frente a la tiranía del Estado y a la tiranía de la mayoría. En este parámetro, la calidad democrática o autocrática del sistema político se mide por los límites bajo los cuales actúa el gobierno. Estos límites se logran con una presencia balanceada de libertades civiles protegidas constitucionalmente, un Estado de Derecho fuerte, un Poder Judicial independiente y controles y equilibrios efectivos que limiten el ejercicio del Poder Ejecutivo.

#### Electoral coverage under siege

With that conceptual framework and at the request of *Democratization*, we present this research that describes the journalistic work of covering electoral processes in authoritarian contexts, specifically in the Venezuelan case between 2013 and 2022, summarized as follows::

- Denial of access to the official electoral source: independent media outlets are unable to obtain exclusive interviews with the members of the CNE or their high-level technicians. Their ability to ask questions is limited during press conferences.
- Refusal by the CNE to issue accreditations for electoral coverage to certain media outlets or critical journalists, whether national, regional, local, or foreign.
- Denial of press access to polling stations or their expulsion, even with official accreditation.

- Unjustified detention of journalists during election coverage, ranging from minutes to days, in some cases, leading to the journalist being brought before courts.
- Destruction of informational material (photos or videos), confiscation of hard drives and/or equipment theft during election day or the electoral campaign.
- Physical assaults on journalists, news teams, or media outlets by supporters of a political trend, security officials, or public entity officials, before, during, or after elections.
- Threats, public intimidation, or judicial persecution of high-profile journalists by high-ranking state officials.
- Prior or subsequent censorship of content by public entities such as Conatel.
- Hacking of journalists' electronic accounts, social media, and/or communication devices by state officials or security agencies.
- Blocking of IP addresses of informational portals and suppression of cable services of international news media, ordered by the state, before, during, or after elections.

In the following pages, readers will observe how actions by the Venezuelan government, led by Nicolás Maduro since April 2013, have evolved against the right to freedom of expression and its effect on election coverage.

To achieve this, we have relied on the annual monitoring performed by the Venezuelan non-governmental organization *EspacioPúblico* (EP) since 2002. Throughout this paper, the data from V-Dem and EP will intersect.

As a conclusion to this research, we will refer to the report of the European Union Electoral Observation Mission for Venezuela regarding the November 2021 elections. The way the Venezuelan State accepts or dismisses the recommendations will shape how the media covers the 2023-2025 electoral cycle, which includes the opposition's primary election, the presidential election, and elections for the National Assembly, governors, and mayors.

## **I. 2013-2022: The worst 10 years for press freedom in Venezuela**

As a starting point, it's pertinent to note that authoritarian practices in Venezuela didn't abruptly begin on Maduro's inauguration day. Instead, Maduro inherited and refined from his mentor, Hugo Chávez, a method of state governance specialized, among other antidemocratic elements, in diminishing the electoral space for participation and political alternation.

In a previous article<sup>2</sup>, we delved into how the logic of restricting freedom of expression and persecuting the media was progressively constructed.

For an in-depth look at the use of elections and electoral conditions to undermine democracy, we recommend Javier Corrales' article, *"El retroceso democrático por irregularidades electorales: el caso Venezuela"*<sup>3</sup>.

For a more detailed description of the government period in question, we have divided these ten years into three stages.

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2 Maru Morales P, "Venezuelan Journalists and Media..."

3 Javier Corrales, "El retroceso democrático por irregularidades electorales: el caso Venezuela", *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*. Obtained June 23, 2023 in: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26936902>

The first stage spans from Maduro's rise to Miraflores in April 2013 to the parliamentary election in December 2015.

The second phase covers the period from January 2016 to December 2020, when the ruling coalition led by Maduro closed all avenues of plurality and alternation in power.

And finally, the period from January 2021 to December 2022. During this stage, the ruling coalition allows minimal conditions for political participation, coinciding, not by chance, with the beginning of an investigation against its leaders at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

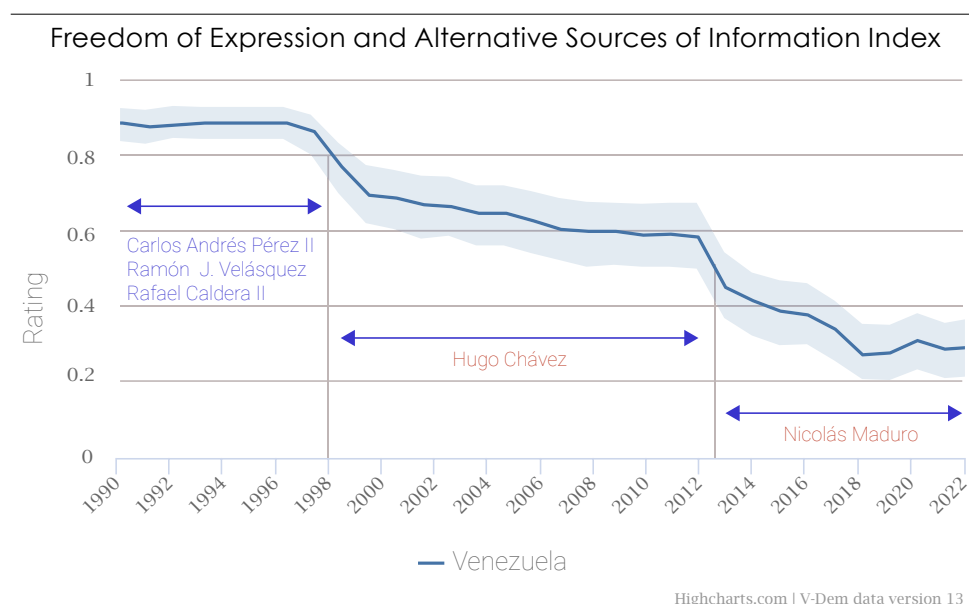


Figure 2. V-Dem Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index. Scale 0 = no freedom of expression; 1 = absolute freedom of expression. Obtained June 29, 2023 in [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/VariableGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/)

Between 2013 and 2022, the National Electoral Council organized 15 electoral processes, including national, regional, or municipal elections, as well as party primaries. Additionally, the

opposition carried out two self-organized popular consultations. On average, there were 1.5 electoral processes per year, similar to the average of the previous 14 years (1999-2012), which was 1.4 yearly elections.

Thus, the frenetic pace of the electoral processes remained during this period, alongside the overall government efforts to:

- Discourage political participation
- Prevent electoral success of actors other than the PSUV
- Nullify opposition parties
- Forcefully ensure that the primary communication reaching the population via the remaining media in the country promotes the government-party message of the PSUV.

During this period, two years –2016 and 2019– passed without any electoral processes. The first was filled with the commotion typical of an election year as it focused from January to September on preparations for the presidential recall referendum against Maduro.

However, the process did not materialize due to months of obstacles, imposition of requirements, and implausible timeframes by the CNE. Eventually, the ruling coalition resorted to a criminal judge in a regional court lacking electoral jurisdiction to suspend the process.

On the contrary, 2017 witnessed up to four electoral processes. However, according to the theoretical model developed by the V-Dem Institute, paradoxically, 2017 marked the onset of autocracy in Venezuela.



Since 2013, following Nicolás Maduro's rise to power, V-Dem exhibits a more drastic decline in nearly all democracy indicators in Venezuela. However, the biennium of 2016-2017 stands out as the period when institutions, elections, and the enjoyment of rights became clearly contingent upon alignment with the ruling coalition (or alternatively, the silence of any dissent).

On the other hand, during this time, elections, institutions, and the enjoyment of rights began to be perceived solely as tools to ensure the political group's permanence in power.

In the context of successive elections and citizen consultations between 2013 and 2022, the number of documented violations of freedom of expression by *EspacioPúblico* doubled compared to Hugo Chávez's government.

While between 2002 and 2012, the total documented cases by the NGO was 1,575, between 2013 and 2022, the total figure increased to 3,497. During Maduro's ten-year tenure, *EspacioPúblico* recorded:

- 1,839 cases of intimidation
- 1,452 cases of censorship
- 691 cases of administrative restrictions
- 595 cases of aggression
- 550 cases of verbal harassment
- 482 cases of threats
- 322 cases of judicial harassment
- 125 cases of attack

- 9 cases of journalist murders
- 8 cases of legal restrictions

Some preliminary definitions

According to *EspacioPúblico*'s methodology<sup>4</sup>, each recorded case may contain more than one type of violation of freedom of expression and more than one victim.

The types of violations primarily against journalists and media that *EspacioPúblico* records annually in its reports are:

- **Assault:** Journalists injured or assaulted by civilians or security forces.
- **Attack:** Press outlets damaged or attacked for disseminating news and opinions.
- **Threat:** Direct or indirect messages against the journalist or their family, attacks on their properties (home, vehicle), surveillance of their family.
- **Censorship:** Official prohibition, confiscated editions, restrictions or impediments to disseminating news or opinions, journalist dismissals, suspension of audiovisual spaces, confiscation or destruction of work equipment, discrimination in the allocation of official advertising, denial of visas to foreign journalists.
- **Intimidation:** Denied access to public buildings, travel restrictions, non-routine inspections, spying or surveillance, detention without a court order, threats

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4 [https://espaciopublico.org/informes\\_anuales/page/2/](https://espaciopublico.org/informes_anuales/page/2/)

from officials, and assault on journalists during their workday.

- **Judicial harassment:** Threats from officials to initiate legal actions, lawsuits for libel and slander to inhibit the dissemination of information, fines imposed, attempts to force journalists to reveal their sources, arrest or detention with a court order, raids on media outlets.
- **Verbal harassment:** Insults or disparagements, narrative portraying the press as a political adversary, approval of resolutions or statements by public entities to condemn journalistic articles.
- **Legal restrictions:** Approval of restrictive laws for press freedom or presentation of legislative projects or executive decrees for this purpose.
- **Death:** Journalists killed while on duty or due to their work after its completion.

## II. 2013-2015: Devising the path for a new media ecosystem

Nicolás Maduro was declared the winner of the presidential election on April 14, 2013, following the repetition of the electoral process due to the death of Hugo Chávez, announced on March 5. The inauguration of what would become his communication policy took place on the same day as his election, with a nationwide Internet outage caused by the State, just as polling stations were closing and the first transmissions of electronic votes were occurring, as reported by EP in its 2013 report<sup>5</sup>.

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5 Carlos Correa, coord. *Informe 2013: Situación del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión e Información en Venezuela*. Espacio Público. Caracas, p. 15-16.

In April, when Maduro transitioned from acting president to constitutional president, violations of freedom of expression increased by 571% compared to the same month of the previous year.

Between 2013 and 2015, three electoral processes took place in Venezuela:

- 2013: Presidential election in April and municipal election in December.
- 2014: Municipal elections in San Cristóbal (Táchira) and San Diego (Carabobo) due to the removal of two newly elected opposition mayors in 2013.
- 2015: MUD primaries in May, PSUV primaries in June, and legislative elections in December.

According to EP, during these three years, there were 807 cases of violations of freedom of expression, 270 incidents of censorship, 233 of intimidation, and 163 of verbal harassment, affecting primarily reporters, photographers, websites, and media outlets.

The year 2014 was particularly violent against media outlets that covered street protests organized by an opposition sector against Nicolás Maduro's government. That year accounted for more than half of the incidents during the entire 2013-2015 period. Out of 159 assaults during this timeframe, 93 occurred in 2014. Similarly, out of 42 attacks, 30 were recorded that year, and regarding the 270 cases of censorship, 145 took place in 2014.

## An instrument and a strategy against freedom of press

From a purely political and institutional perspective, the defeat of Chavismo in the 2015 parliamentary elections triggered a series of subsequent actions by the ruling coalition against democratic institutions and legality. However, two years before that event, Maduro had already clearly shown his action plan concerning the media.

In 2013, *EspacioPúblico* reported the shutdown of television and radio programs, along with the blocking of websites that shared a common feature: criticism of the government's management.

The same year, between the presidential election in April and the municipal election in December, Maduro's government created the instrument and strategy to silence criticism and dissent within his administration.

The instrument: the Alfredo Maneiro Editorial Corporation. The strategy: the acquisition of media outlets by business groups or entrepreneurs with ties to the government.

The objective of the Alfredo Maneiro Editorial Corporation was, from the outset, to prevent free access to currency for importing supplies needed for newspaper and magazine production and to monopolize access to newsprint<sup>6</sup>.

It's worth mentioning that the first president of Maneiro, Hugo Cabezas, was arrested in April of 2023 for involvement in a

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6 Carlos Carmona, "Corporación Editorial Alfredo Maneiro". *Diario El Impulso*, January 5th 2017. Accessed March 2023 <https://www.elimpulso.com/2017/01/05/corporacion-editorial-alfredo-maneiro/>

corruption scheme within the state-owned *Corporación Venezolana de Guayana* and *Cartones de Venezuela*.

In any case, while the decline and transformation of print occurred in other countries due to technological advancements and shifts in public preferences, in Venezuela it resulted from a policy restricting the free flow of information.

First, the smaller newspapers, the regional and local ones with limited reach, folded, leaving inhabitants of regions outside the capital without spaces for critique, independent analysis, or comparison of governance or candidate proposals. Between 2013, 2014, and 2015, newspapers closed in Anzoátegui, Nueva Esparta, Caracas, Cojedes, and Sucre.

The transformation was evident in critical media outlets whose editorial stance shifted to echo the government's narrative amid opaque buying and selling processes. Emblematic cases included *Últimas Noticias* (Cadena Capriles) and *El Universal*, sold in 2013 and 2014, respectively, to business groups linked to Venezuelan government figures.

*Globovisión*, the television channel, was also part of this dynamic. After facing a decade of judicial persecution against its owners, administrative harassment, and attacks on its journalists, the outlet was eventually purchased in 2014 by businessman Raúl Gorrín. Five years later, in 2019, Gorrín was included in the U.S. sanction list due to alleged involvement in money laundering and bribery schemes.

### **III. 2016-2020. Breakdown of the constitutional order and imprisonment of journalist Roland Carreño**

This period coincided politically with the 2016-2021 legislative term, theoretically led by the opposition after winning the majority of seats in the National Assembly. However, from Miraflores, that Parliament was sentenced to extinction: it curtailed its integration, disqualified, imprisoned, or forced its members into exile, withdrew its funding, stripped it of its constitutional powers, and led the rest of the state's powers and institutions to disregard it.

During this time, there were eight electoral processes in Venezuela:

- In July 2017, an opposition-held popular consultation (in-person) to reject the election of the Constituent Assembly; that same month, the Constituent Assembly election; regional elections in October; and municipal elections in December.
- In 2018, the presidential election was held in April and municipal council elections in December.
- In December 2020, the opposition held a popular consultation (both in-person and virtual) to reject the call for parliamentary elections. Shortly afterward, parliamentary elections were held.

The strategy to clamp down on independent media continued, leaving journalists with fewer national traditional platforms to carry out their work. Between 2016 and 2018, iconic Venezuelan journalism publications ceased their print editions: *El Carabobeño*, with 82 years of history, and *El Nacional*, with 75

years of circulation. Additionally, ten other regional and local media outlets closed their doors.

Over these five years, *EspacioPúblico* documented 2,219 cases of violations against freedom of expression, almost tripling the number recorded in the first three years of Maduro's government. Notably, instances of intimidation were the most frequent during this period, totaling 1,362 cases.

Following these were 844 incidents of censorship, 497 administrative restrictions, 427 aggressions, 313 threats, 350 cases of verbal harassment, 158 instances of judicial harassment, 71 attacks, seven deaths, and six legal restrictions.

2017, a fateful year

According to comparative research conducted by political scientist John Magdaleno, 2017 marked the onset of electoral autocracy in the country. The primary indicators signaling this dramatic shift in Venezuela's political system include:

- Breakdown of institutional order instigated by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice<sup>7</sup>;
- Widespread repression of citizen protests recorded between April and July 2017, resulting in the death of

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7 "Transparencia Venezuela. Con dos sentencias el TSJ le dio el último zarpazo a la democracia en Venezuela". Accessed July 18, 2023 in <https://transparenciave.org/dos-sentencias-tsj-le-dio-ultimo-zarpazo-la-democracia-venezuela/>



150 individuals, as documented by Provea<sup>8</sup> and the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict<sup>9</sup> ;

- Installation of a Constituent Assembly in July 2017, illegitimate in its convocation and following a rigged electoral process, as later denounced by the company Smartmatic, a former contractor of the Venezuelan Electoral Power;
- Suppression of the minimum conditions for electoral competition by the National Electoral Council, undermining any possibility of access to power for the opposition, as reported by the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) in October 2017<sup>10</sup>,
- Invention of procedures and formalities not foreseen in the Constitution, so the governors and mayors elected in 2017 could assume their functions;
- Increasing blockades of access to digital news portals;
- Persecution, harassment, and expulsion of foreign correspondents from the country;
- Approval of a “Law against Hate” by the Constituent Assembly to generate censorship, self-censorship, and prior censorship in social media communications<sup>11</sup>.

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8 Microsite dedicated to the protests of 2017 <https://provea.org/category/trabajos-especiales/protestas-2017/>

9 <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/sin-categoria/venezuela-2-675-protestas-y-95-fallecidos-desde-el-1-de-abril-2017>

10 Accessed March 28th, 2023 in <https://runrun.es/nacional/328649/comunicado-mud-exige-auditoria-total-cuantitativa-y-cualitativa-de-todo-el-proceso-electoral/>

11 Correa, Carlos; coord. *Espacio Público. Informe 2018: Situación del Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión e Información en Venezuela*. Accessed March 28, 2023

In that context, cases of violations against freedom of expression surged in 2017: a total of 708 cases, the highest record in all of *EspacioPúblico's* data. The actions against journalists and media were evident:

- 54 radio stations and eight regional TV channels went off the air.
- 17 print media outlets stopped circulating due to paper shortages.
- 5 international channels were removed from cable TV operators.
- 13 news websites were attacked or blocked that year.
- 17 foreign correspondents were expelled, denied entry, or detained and held without communication by airport police for several hours.
- 51 violations of the right to freedom of expression on the Internet.
- Over 20 journalists from Táchira, Mérida, Bolívar, Yaracuy, Nueva Esparta, Distrito Capital, and others were not accredited by the CNE to cover that year's elections.
- Conatel warned audiovisual media not to use the term 'popular consultation' to refer to the opposition's call for July 16 and to 'be careful with that coverage', as they considered the activity outside the scope of the Constitution.

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in <https://espaciopublico.org/informe-2018-situacion-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-html/>)

- The National Electoral Council issued a document titled “Media Coverage Guidelines in Polling Centers,” which contained a series of prohibitions for the coverage of the Constituent Assembly election on July 29<sup>12</sup>.

The National Union of Press Workers (SNTP<sup>13</sup>) reported that between March 31 and June 24, 2017, 376 press workers had been assaulted by security forces, and 33 others had been unlawfully detained. The years after 2017 weren’t any better for the press. For instance, in 2018, although the number of cases decreased from 708 to 387 compared to 2017, the number of acts of intimidation only slightly dropped from 304 to 245. In 2019, acts of intimidation even surpassed those in 2017, reaching a total of 334, and in 2020, the figure for intimidation cases reached 356.

Los años posteriores a 2017 no fueron mejores para la prensa. En 2018 por ejemplo, aunque el número de casos bajó de 708 a 387 en comparación con 2017, el número de actos de intimidación apenas descendió desde 304 a 245. En 2019, los actos de intimidación superaron incluso los de 2017, llegando a un total de 334; y en 2020 la cifra de intimidación alcanzó los 356 casos.

On October 26, 2020, Venezuelan journalist and activist from the Voluntad Popular party, Roland Carreño, was arrested. At the time of his arrest, Carreño was part of the political team of Deputy Juan Guaidó, who, since January 2019, was sworn in as the interim president of Venezuela following the declaration of a power vacuum by the National Assembly.

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12 Capturado el 29 de marzo de 2023 en [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TcSqqWVJw84J:www4.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa\\_electoral/elecciones/2017/centrosreceptores/documentos/guia\\_informativa\\_medidas\\_contingencia.pdf&cd=1&hl=es&ct=clnk&gl=ve&client=firefox-b-e](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TcSqqWVJw84J:www4.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/elecciones/2017/centrosreceptores/documentos/guia_informativa_medidas_contingencia.pdf&cd=1&hl=es&ct=clnk&gl=ve&client=firefox-b-e)

13 Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa.

As of the writing of this text in July 2023, Carreño remains behind bars, and his trial has been initiated on four occasions. According to Venezuelan legislation, if a trial goes without a hearing for more than ten days, it must start anew. The most recent restart occurred on January 16, 2023.

#### **IV. 2021-2022. Looking ahead to 2024 amid the ICC investigation**

During the period from January 2021 to December 2022, three electoral processes took place in Venezuela: the PSUV primaries in August 2021, the elections for governors, mayors, and state and municipal legislative bodies in November 2021, and the re-run of the governor elections in Barinas in January 2022. This occurred after a political maneuver involving both the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) and the General Comptroller's Office that annulled the victory of opposition figure Freddy Superlano on November 21, 2021.

In terms of political and electoral guarantees, there was a slight improvement leading up to the November 2021 election:

- The ruling coalition released certain political prisoners or lifted threats against some exiled leaders, allowing them to participate in the elections.
- Following an executive order, the seizure of one of the three party cards, which had been confiscated in 2020 by the decision of the TSJ, was halted, and the opposition's use of the electoral card from the MUD was restored.
- Most importantly, the entry of the European Union Electoral Observation Mission was permitted.

It's worth noting that these specific concessions occurred, not coincidentally, in the context of the initiation of an investigation by the International Criminal Court against the highest leaders of the Venezuelan state for alleged commission of crimes against humanity, which include systematic persecution against the political opposition.

Testimony: Alex Vásquez and how journalism is practiced in an autocracy

In terms of guarantees for journalistic work, there were no improvements during this two-year period. The testimony shared for this investigation by Venezuelan journalist Alex Vásquez serves as a window into that reality.

By April 2013, when Maduro came to power, Vásquez had only graduated three years prior. In other words, his entire professional practice in Venezuela unfolded under the political and communication model designed by Chavismo-Madurismo.

During his time in Venezuela –he has been living in Mexico since late 2021, working for an international news agency–, like many reporters under 45, he only knew one way of practicing the profession:

“There has always been persecution, intimidation, and threats; it has been a constant since I started practicing journalism. It intensifies when challenging elections for Chavismo are on the horizon. I've experienced attacks during electoral campaigns: stones thrown at us, roadblocks where they hit the car windows we move in, having to hide in a house to avoid being assaulted. Whenever I had to cover a campaign event near the

National Assembly, go to the Assembly during electoral periods, or when something particularly sensitive for Chavismo was being approved, the *colectivos*<sup>14</sup> that usually threaten journalists with weapons would appear, chasing us and assaulting us”<sup>15</sup>.

In 2021, three months before that year’s elections, while Vásquez was still in Caracas, he was a victim of verbal harassment and intimidation by a high-ranking government official. Here’s what happened: on August 16, he was summoned to a press conference by President Nicolás Maduro at the Miraflores Palace<sup>16</sup>. Vásquez asked three questions regarding matters of interest for the international audience, which Maduro responded to with poorly veiled discomfort.

The following day, Mario Silva, a deputy of PSUV in the National Assembly elected in 2020, dedicated 29 minutes of his television program, *La Hojilla*<sup>17</sup>, to discredit Vásquez and other journalists and media present at the press conference, labeling them all as “communication mercenaries.”

Mario Silva discredited Vásquez and other journalists and media present at the press conference, labeling them all “communication mercenaries.” “Silva called me shameless, ridiculous, and stupid; he said the US pays me, that *Bloomberg*

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14 In Venezuela, ‘colectivos’ refer to far-left armed paramilitary groups supporting the Chavista/Madurista government.

15 Interview with Alex Vásquez carried out for this investigation.

16 Video captured on March 22, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhOE-67bgYU>

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pms5yoP4xyE&list=PLSWb1qzijMBuIC59AhPdLvhtWN0T7rEms&index=120>

wrote my questions because I cannot think for myself, and so on,” the reporter recounted.

But that wasn’t the only experience he faced as a journalist in Venezuela: “There were situations where I had to be cautious due to the articles I published. For instance, in 2020, I reported on Operation Gideon (an attempt by a group of mercenaries to enter Venezuela via maritime route in May 2020), and another journalist who had published something similar warned me that he had spent an entire night detained by SEBIN and interrogated. I chose to stay away from my home for a couple of nights. That's always been the case.”

Two related practices: intimidation to generate self-censorship and direct censorship

Intimidation against journalists, like the case of Alex Vásquez, has a central objective: to generate self-censorship. That is, for the journalist to remain silent, not write, not report, not sign their notes, or refrain from asking questions and challenging high-ranking officials.

According to V-Dem data, between 2018 and 2022, cases of government effective censorship on social media increased, as did government efforts to censor the media in general.

Let’s take a look: from 2000 to 2012, the “Effective censorship on social media” indicator remains above 3 on a scale of 0 to 4. On this scale, the closer to zero, the more effective the censorship. Precisely from 2013, the indicator begins to decline. In 2019, the index is 2.8; by 2020, it dropped to 2.6, and in 2022, it closed at 2.5

When we review the indicator called ‘Government efforts to censor the media in general,’ the outlook appears much more dramatic. In 1999, the indicator stood at 2.25 points on a scale of 0 to 4. From that year onwards, it recorded a sustained decline until reaching its lowest point in 2018, when it was 0.07.

On this scale, a value of 0 reveals that censorship attempts are direct and routine; 1 indicates that censorship attempts are indirect but routine; 2 suggests that attempts are direct but limited to particularly sensitive issues; 3 signifies that attempts are indirect and limited to sensitive matters; and 4 implies that the government rarely attempts any form of censorship on the media, and when it does, the responsible officials are sanctioned for it.

For this indicator, V-Dem clarifies that indirect forms of censorship can include ‘allocation of transmission frequencies for political reasons, withdrawal of state funding, influence over printing facilities and distribution networks, discretionary allocation of advertising, burdensome registration requirements, prohibitive fees, and bribery.’ Virtually all, if not all, of these methods are present in the Venezuelan reality.

In its 2021 report, EP illustrates the extent of the devastation of print media with a statistic: by 2015, 38.8% of the population used national print newspapers for information; by 2021, due to the annihilation of the print press, that figure had plummeted to a mere 3.1%.

The NGO adds that 42% of the cases of violations of freedom of expression in 2021 occurred on the internet: ‘The relevance of internet-based media (social networks, websites, portals, instant messaging, video services) is associated with the progressive weakening of the traditional media ecosystem. All of this is



fostered by public policies driven by the national government and, to a lesser extent, by changes in consumption patterns due to the emergence of new modes of cultural and informational consumption.'

A final, undoubtedly dramatic, piece of information: between 2018 and 2022, the Venezuelan government focused on shutting down radio stations. According to *EspacioPúblico*, more than 110 radio stations were taken off the air by Conatel during that period, under two arguments: non-compliance with procedures to renew the concession or the clandestine or illegal use of the radio spectrum.

The owners, legal representatives, and directors of many of these stations have publicly denounced either not having access to an administrative procedure to present their arguments or having submitted renewal requests in a timely manner but receiving no response from the government, only the order to shut down.

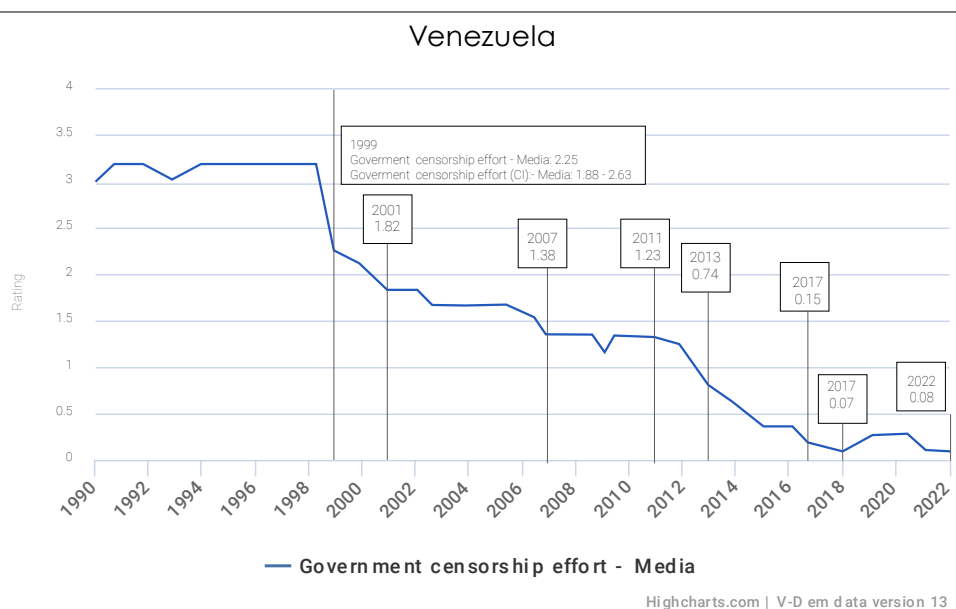


Figure 3. Government effort to censor traditional media between 1999 and 2022.  
Source: Analysis of graphs by country by V-DEM [https://www.v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/)

## V. In conclusion: The EU EOM Report

The Report from the European Union Electoral Observation Mission on the November 21, 2021, elections provides a clear and objective reflection of the day-to-day reality of journalism in Venezuela, particularly regarding electoral coverage.

The EU EOM accompanying the 2021 election was the first in 15 years, with the previous mission present during the 2006 presidential elections.

The report on the 21st of November spans 88 pages, dedicating 19 pages to media coverage of the electoral process. The term 'media' appears 60 times within the document<sup>18</sup>.

Among the findings of the Mission regarding media and communication during the campaign, the following can be highlighted:

Entre los hallazgos de la Misión en materia de medios y comunicación durante la campaña, destacan:

- Self-censorship observed in media outlets across 21 states.
- Editorial changes in media influenced by political pressures in 13 states.

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<sup>18</sup> European Union Electoral Observation Mission for Venezuela, 2021. Informe de la MOE-UE para las elecciones regionales y municipales del 21 de noviembre de 2021 en Venezuela. Accessed on July 19, 2023 in [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-venezuela-2021/informe-final-moe-ue-venezuela-2021\\_es?s=4434](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-venezuela-2021/informe-final-moe-ue-venezuela-2021_es?s=4434)).

- The National Telecommunications Commission sanctions media outlets and/or revokes their licenses without judicial verification of the infringement.
- Significant bias in national media outlets in favor of the ruling party.
- Internet has gained significant importance as a communication channel in Venezuela due to declining trust in traditional media.
- Government attempts to influence digital media include website blocking, smear campaigns against journalists, and propaganda operations.

Of the 23 final recommendations from the report, five directly relate to media and electoral coverage:

1. Ensure balanced coverage in state media during electoral campaigns.
2. Repeal the Hate Law to promote freedom of expression and prevent self-censorship.
3. Cease policies aimed at manipulating public discourse on social media platforms.
4. Enhance the monitoring capacities of social media by the CNE to raise awareness about campaign rule violations.
5. Establish clear procedures for controlling access to polling centers and verifying accreditations

In theory, implementing these recommendations relies on the National Electoral Council (CNE) exercising its autonomy and acting as an independent power. In the Venezuelan reality, it depends on political agreements between government sectors and

the democratic opposition, within the framework of negotiations that commenced in August 2021 in Mexico but that have been stalled since November 2022.

But beyond the implementation of the EU's recommendations, the report allows the international community, researchers, and other stakeholders interested in freedom of expression to have objective evidence that in the Venezuelan case, violations of freedom of expression and the persecution of the independent press and journalism are a systematic, recurring practice orchestrated through various methods.

The Venezuelan journalist has scarcely the resource of denunciation and documentation. Organizations like *Espacio Público*, the Press and Society Institute, the National Union of Press Workers, Provea, and many others advocating for human rights and freedom of expression serve as a megaphone to showcase these recurrent violations that, in most cases, do not attain justice. These violations primarily undermine citizens who have fewer voices, fewer spaces, and fewer media outlets to stay informed or to turn to in order to amplify a complaint, an issue, or even a proposal.