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Changing to Remain

I perfectly remember the fear I felt when I asked my thesis advisor whether I was venturing into dangerous territory with my research. She told me I was, but that the only thing we had to be careful about was our choice of words, in order to reduce the risk as much as possible.

That was when I realized something a professor had told us during our first semester: studying Political Science in Venezuela means doing so in a breeding ground. Back in 2019, that phrase seemed to have meaning. But in 2025, I understood the signifier. That breeding ground could become your best resource or your worst nightmare. And that was the tightrope I decided to walk in my final year of college.

When I think about what motivated me to follow that path—a path I had to justify to myself, and to others, many times—the first thing that comes to mind is that I needed to graduate soon, and to graduate soon I needed to write a thesis (in a program where a thesis was not an official requirement). But when I think about it more carefully, that doesn't really answer the question: why did I choose to make my life more difficult by studying that particular subject?

Perhaps because I often felt that we were so busy analyzing what we, as the opposition, were doing wrong that we were neglecting attempts to understand what was actually sustaining Chavismo. Perhaps because I wanted to understand how a political project survives when everything seems to be pushing it toward decline. Or perhaps because, although I didn't know it yet, I sensed that political projects also speak through their symbols.

I chose to study Chavismo during one of the years of greatest political persecution. I chose to examine the transformations of revolutionary language in the same year I had to leave my home because it no longer seemed safe to stay there. And while people very dear to me told me how strong I was for doing it, the truth is that the last thing I felt was brave. I simply had to keep rowing. I had to keep swimming. I had to keep going.

My thesis —the first of its kind at the School of Political and Administrative Studies at the Central University of Venezuela— examined the transformations in Nicolás Maduro's revolutionary language between 2013 and 2023:¹ how his discourse became more radical as the crisis deepened; how his symbols changed; how his image changed; how he distanced himself from Chávez's ghost when he needed to forge an identity of his own, and how he returned to it when things got complicated. But above all, it examined something more important: language did not accompany politics. Language was politics.

1 María F Villalobos, "Lenguaje y crisis política: La transformación del discurso revolucionario durante el gobierno del presidente Nicolás Maduro, período 2013-2023" (Bachelor's Thesis, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2025), https://www.academia.edu/164889218/LENGUAJE_Y_CRISIS_POL%C3%8DTICA_LA_TRANSFORMACI%C3%93N_DEL_DISCURSO_REVOLUCIONARIO_DURANTE_EL_GOBIERNO_DEL_PRESIDENTE_NICOL%C3%81S_MADURO

Political projects speak even when they believe they are simply communicating. They speak through colors. They speak through symbols. They speak through those present and through those absent. They even speak through what they are trying to stop looking like.

That is why one of the first things I evaluated during my research —although it was not part of the study itself— was the transformation of *Somos Venezuela*.

In 2017, Nicolás Maduro announced the launch of the movement.² In January 2018, its legalization was announced,³ and in February, Delcy Rodríguez resigned her membership in the PSUV⁴ to take on the role of Secretary General of a different organization, one that was nevertheless politically aligned with the government's project. At the time, it might have seemed like just another reorganization within the Chavista ecosystem. A diversification, or an expansion.

But in retrospect, perhaps it was something else.

While the PSUV remained *rojo rojito* —deep, unmistakably red, the color forever-associated with the Chavista regime—

2 Ministerio del Poder Popular de Economía y Finanzas, “Pdte. Maduro lideró el lanzamiento del Movimiento Somos Venezuela,” June 12, 2017, <https://www.mppef.gob.ve/pdte-maduro-lidero-el-lanzamiento-del-movimiento-somos-venezuela/>

3 María Victoria Fermín Kancev, “Maduro decide legalizar el «Movimiento Somos Venezuela» como partido político,” *Efecto Cocuyo*, January 27, 2018, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/maduro-decide-legalizar-el-movimiento-somos-venezuela-como-partido-politico/>

4 Agencia Anadolu, “Líder de la constituyente venezolana renunció al partido oficialista,” February 7, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/es/mundo/1%C3%ADder-de-la-constituyente-venezolana-renunci%C3%B3-al-partido-oficialista/1057299>

Somos Venezuela began speaking a different visual language. More colors. A more polished image. An aesthetic less closely associated with the original Chavismo. They did not completely abandon the founding narrative. They repackaged it.

And perhaps that is one of the hardest things to recognize when you are too close to a historical moment: not every change announces its importance out loud. Some appear as administrative decisions, tactical moves, small internal reorganizations. But over time, you begin to suspect that certain forms also function as laboratories.

Somos Venezuela was not merely a party card, a different color, or a short-term political maneuver. At least in retrospect, it was an exercise in political plasticity. A test of whether Chavismo could try to expand its boundaries without completely breaking with its core. It could keep invoking Chávez, but invoke him differently. It could continue to claim a revolutionary legacy, but present it with a different texture. It could preserve its core of power while experimenting with a different way of presenting itself.

Perhaps that was what interested me without my realizing it at the time: not change as rupture, but change as continuity. The ability of a power structure to alter its surface without abandoning what sustains it.

The signs were there. The red flags were there. But as often happens in the social sciences, we recognize patterns more clearly when we look back.

My thesis was not about the Rodríguez family. But it did leave me with a methodological certainty that seems relevant again today: symbolic changes are rarely superficial. And that brings us to the debate of these past few months. As Ricardo del

Búfalo told Paola Bautista de Alemán in an interview for *Revista Democratización*:⁵ **people aren't stupid.**

And that phrase, which may sound too colloquial for this piece, contains a truth more serious than it might seem. Societies learn to read power. They do so with imperfect tools, with intuition, with humor, with exhaustion, with anger, with memory. But they do it.

In Venezuela, that kind of reading has also become almost a form of survival. For years, we have learned to interpret the smallest gestures: who appears in a photograph, who stops appearing, which word is repeated, which slogan disappears, which color is abandoned, which tone is softened, which enemy is no longer named. In authoritarian contexts, politics is rarely understood solely through what is officially announced. More often, it is understood through what seeps through the cracks.

That is why political humor is not merely entertainment. It is also a form of collective intelligence. A way of processing what does not yet have a name. A mechanism for saying, before formal analysis catches up, that something is shifting.

Every meme exists because people are paying attention to behavior. Reading conversations. Finding patterns. There are social scientists studying political processes. There are teams tracking digital trends. There are taxi drivers saying things that end up becoming part of the national conversation. There is a citizenry that no longer consumes politics solely through press

5 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Ricardo del Búfalo: «La cultura debe interpelar a la sociedad»," *Democratización* (Red FORMA), March 18, 2022, 73, <https://red-forma.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Democratizacion-18-marzo-22.pdf>

conferences or headlines. Today, politics happens on TikTok. On WhatsApp. In an improvised livestream. In user-generated content. And when thousands of people start noticing the same things at the same time, it is probably worth paying attention, because Delcy Rodríguez does not change by accident.

What took Nicolás Maduro a decade to build —that gradual shift from a classic revolutionary narrative toward a more pragmatic, more flexible form of communication, less dependent on the original political liturgy— has taken Delcy Rodríguez only months.

The first thing I thought when I started noticing these changes was that maybe I was reading too much into them. After spending a year studying symbols, political language, and discursive construction, you start finding patterns where there are none. The political-science equivalent of Googling your symptoms and convincing yourself you have a terminal illness. But then more things kept appearing. And they kept appearing quickly. Too quickly.

A new aesthetic. New tones. New emphases. New words. New priorities. A discourse less anchored in permanent revolution and more oriented toward stability, governance, and normalcy. A political image less defined by ideological confrontation and closer to something that, not long ago, would have been difficult to imagine within Chavismo.

What we are seeing is not merely a change in communication. We are watching power shed its skin. And shedding its skin does not mean changing its nature.

In our case, it means precisely the opposite: shedding a form that no longer serves its purpose in order to better preserve what

it seeks to protect. Animals shed their skin to grow, to survive, to adapt to an environment that demands a different surface. Power, in its own way, does the same.

That is why the image is so unsettling. We are not witnessing a democratic conversion, a moral reckoning, or a renunciation of authoritarian impulses. We are witnessing something more ambiguous: a transformation in appearance to better manage a new stage. A skin that is less strident, less red, less epic, less revolutionary on the surface. But not necessarily any less authoritarian underneath.

What is truly dangerous about certain political mutations is not that they completely conceal what they are, but that they can make themselves familiar enough, palatable enough, normal enough that part of society begins to live alongside them without ever fully naming them.

My research examined how Nicolás Maduro had progressively transformed his political language as his political needs changed. How symbols appeared and disappeared. How his communication priorities shifted. How revolutionary discourse hardened or softened depending on the political moment.

But there was something more. Language was not merely a way of communicating political decisions. It was a tool for building legitimacy. For regaining control. For shaping public conversation. For ensuring that society received —consciously or unconsciously— what those in power needed it to receive. Because language does not merely describe reality. It also shapes it. It organizes it. It establishes a hierarchy, what matters and what does not, what constitutes a threat, what problem deserves attention, and what problem should disappear from the radar.

Sometimes it changes the words, sometimes the symbols, sometimes the aesthetics. And sometimes it changes all of them at once. That is why —and I say this at the risk of looking like the Charlie Day meme with the conspiracy board and red strings— I have always found it hard to believe in coincidences when it comes to power. Even less so when it comes to political systems that have demonstrated an enormous capacity to adapt —or, as Juan Miguel Matheus has called it, autocratic resilience—⁶ in order to survive.

What we are seeing today does not seem to be merely a transformation in communication. It looks like an attempt to produce a new reading of reality. Because when an autocracy needs to sustain itself through a new political stage, it also needs to construct new frameworks of legitimacy. It needs new languages. New symbols. New interlocutors. And new ways of explaining itself.

Perhaps that is why there is something about this stage that feels familiar. Not because we have seen it before in exactly the same form, but because there is a logic behind the mechanism. For years, Chavismo built political legitimacy through revolutionary epic, through Chávez, through confrontation, and through the constant construction of enemies.

6 Juan Miguel Matheus, entrevista por María F. Villalobos, 14 de junio de 2025, transcripción en: María F. Villalobos, “Lenguaje y crisis política: La transformación del discurso revolucionario durante el gobierno del presidente Nicolás Maduro, período 2013-2023” (tesis de pregrado, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2023), Anexo D, https://www.academia.edu/164889218/LENGUAJE_Y_CRISIS_POL%C3%8DTICA_LA_TRANSFORMACI%C3%93N_DEL_DISCURSO_REVOLUCIONARIO_DURANTE_EL_GOBIERNO_DEL_PRESIDENTE_NICOL%C3%81S_MADURO

But political systems do not survive for decades without learning to adapt, and neither do authoritarian regimes. Systems of power change when their incentives change —when they need new forms of legitimacy, new allies, new audiences, new ways of producing stability. And perhaps that is the important question. It is not simply what is changing, but why it needs to change now.

When language changes rapidly, when symbols change, when forms change, and when communication priorities shift, we are often not seeing merely a change in narrative. We are seeing political adaptation.

And that is where the most difficult layer to confront emerges: autocracies do not adapt in the abstract. They adapt to concrete incentives.

Sometimes those incentives come from an exhausted society that no longer responds to the old codes of mobilization in the same way. Sometimes they come from an economy that needs to promise order even when it cannot offer justice. Sometimes they come from international actors willing to prioritize stability. And sometimes they come from all of these things at once.

That is why it is not enough to say that the narrative has changed. We have to ask what conditions made that change worthwhile. Which new audiences is it trying to appeal to? What costs is it trying to reduce? Which conversation is it trying to displace? Which part of reality does it need to make acceptable again?