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spotlight

The Conflict Endures

Venezuela after the Intervention

On 3 January 2026, US forces captured Nicolás Maduro, but the conflict over who is excluded from political power did not disappear with him. Almost six months later, two earthquakes exposed a state hollowed out by corruption, mismanagement and years of confrontation. The damage was not merely physical, since the conflict is also kept alive by each side denying the other a legitimate place in the nation, and because removing those in power is not the same as transforming the conflict. Europe now has a narrow window to address what lies beneath the crisis, drawing on its own experience of conflict transformation.

Rescuers work at the site of a collapsed building in the aftermath of the June 24 earthquakes, in La Guaira, Venezuela. But what kind of sustainable support could save the country? Photo: © picture alliance / REUTERS | Ricardo Arduengo.

BY VANESSA ELECHIGUERRA LABARCA

When two earthquakes struck Venezuela in June 2026, only 39 seconds apart,[1] they hit a state already weakened by years of confrontation. The conflict behind that weakness is older than Chávez and Maduro, and at its heart lies the question of who is left out of political power. The democratic order established after 1958 gradually came to exclude the communist left,[2] while the decades of party alternation that followed produced a political elite detached from a population that remained poor despite the country's oil wealth. The 1989 civil uprising known as the *Caracazo*, when the army suppressed protests over rising living costs, made that distance impossible to ignore.[3]

Hugo Chávez built a political movement on those grievances, and his failed coup attempt in 1992 became a symbol of political redemption for many excluded sectors. His 1998 election brought that excluded left into government. Exclusion did not end there but changed direction, as the parties that had governed since 1958 were pushed to the margins,[4] and the failed 2002 coup against Chávez further radicalised both sides.

When Chávez died in 2013, Maduro inherited a government built around his predecessor's personal authority and increasingly organised around remaining in power, pursued through contested elections, the sidelining of the opposition-controlled legislature and the imprisonment of political rivals.[5] Successive rounds of negotiation between government and opposition, mediated from abroad, opened and collapsed without a lasting agreement.

Venezuela has been described as a political crisis, a humanitarian emergency and a case of democratic collapse. Each label captures part of the story, but none explains why the country remained so vulnerable or why ten years of negotiations between government and opposition failed to produce a lasting agreement.

That failure became undeniable on 28 July 2024, when the government declared Nicolás Maduro the winner without publishing the disaggregated results, while the opposition's own tally, collected by citizen volunteers at most polling stations, pointed to a different outcome.[6] Each side accepted only the figures confirming its own claim to legitimacy, closing off the last realistic chance of a negotiated transition.

INFOBOX

From Diagnosis to Intervention

Venezuela's conflict is sustained across institutions, political identities, emotions and external relations. Coleman's work suggests that intervention must begin by understanding how those parts reinforce one another. It should improve the process before demanding a final settlement, involve actors beyond political elites and connect urgent measures with the longer work of rebuilding coexistence (Peter T. Coleman, The Five Percent: Finding Solutions to Seemingly Impossible Conflicts, PublicAffairs, 2011).

That political cycle ended with the US military intervention of 3 January 2026, condemned across Latin America as a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty and international law,[7] though it did not resolve the conflict that made such an outcome possible. Venezuela is therefore best understood as an intractable conflict.[8] What began as a struggle between government and opposition spread through institutions, social relations and everyday language, and can no longer be resolved through an elite agreement alone. The conflict must also be addressed where it now lives, in the relationships between ordinary Venezuelans. Its persistence is not a prediction about Venezuela but a feature of conflicts that have hardened over many years.[9] Distrust makes cooperation look naive, a perceived threat turns compromise into danger, and contempt makes recognition of the other side morally unacceptable.[10] The question, then, is not only how to organise a transition, but whether Venezuelans can rebuild the minimum conditions for peaceful coexistence.

THE RELATIONAL CONFLICT

These relational dynamics are not merely theoretical. A post-intervention online survey of 236 Venezuelans, designed to test hypotheses rather than represent the population, found them firmly in place,[11] with contempt as the strongest predictor of unwillingness to negotiate. Fear and anger may intensify conflict, but contempt goes further, since it does not merely react to a threat or a harm, but denies the adversary's moral worth and right to a legitimate place in political life.[12]

This denial is also visible in public discourse. In April 2026, during a Madrid rally supporting María Corina Machado's Nobel Peace Prize nomination, members of the crowd demanded the removal of Delcy Rodríguez, Venezuela's acting president and Maduro's former executive vice-president, using the racially charged insult "la mona" (the monkey).[13] Two months later, senior *chavista*[14] figures such as Diosdado Cabello ruled out any negotiations, declaring "*con ellos no está planteado nada, y con ella menos*" (nothing is on the table with them, and even less with her).[15] Neither side's rejection was really about policy. Each denied the other a legitimate place in the nation's political life.

That same difficulty with accepting the adversary's continued political presence appears in a June 2026 Delphos survey, where 46.8% showed low acceptance of political pardons in exchange for a peaceful transition, 48.5% rejected any alliance with the ruling party, and only 22% saw it as viable for chavista figures to remain in power.[16] These figures reflect hostility, but also a demand for justice that must be addressed by any lasting agreement.

THE UNITED STATES INSIDE THE CONFLICT

Venezuela's intractability did not develop in a vacuum. Internal dynamics interacted with escalating US coercion for years, from sanctions imposed in 2015 and 2017 to the 2019 embargo[17] and the naval deployment in the Caribbean from August 2025[18] that preceded military action.

In March 2026, Washington recognised Delcy Rodríguez as the sole head of state, citing her contribution to stability.[19] Executive Order 14373 later placed Venezuelan oil revenue in US custody, with the Secretary of State determining its use and the Treasury administering the funds, marking a significant loss of sovereignty.[20]

This arrangement amounts to tutelage because its terms are set more in Washington than in Caracas. Much of the apparatus sustaining Maduro remains in place, though quietly reorganised around US strategic interests, a shift barely registered by much of the *chavista* base. Washington's policy follows three phases: stabilisation, recovery and transition,[21] moving from consolidating power to economic reconstruction and elections, ending with Venezuelan institutions taking responsibility without permanent external tutelage.

Within that phase, Washington opened a channel of dialogue with the government through Dinorah Figuera, former president of the 2015 National Assembly, rather than opposition leader María Corina Machado. The talks produced a roadmap on democratic institutions, electoral reform and political participation guarantees.[22] Reconciliation is a strong element of this phase through amnesty, prisoner releases and the return of exiles, alongside rebuilding civil society and reopening the oil market.

Judged against what made the conflict intractable, the plan matters but falls short. Amnesty may ease

outgoing *chavista* officials into the process, while the return of exiles reintegrates opposition figures who left the country. They do little to change how each side defines the other as an enemy, or to address the memories sustaining contempt.

TOWARDS CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

A constitutional resolution would have served Venezuela better than tutelage. That opportunity was lost, and any transformation must begin with the reality now in place. Power is being redistributed, while the forces that made the conflict intractable remain. This is where European experience could make a distinct contribution.[23]

Europe has taken a different approach from Washington and commands more flexible room for action, since its measures, including an arms embargo, travel bans and asset freezes against specific individuals, avoided exerting broad economic pressure on the population.[24] That gives Europe credibility to work where stabilisation alone is insufficient, notably in rebuilding trust and institutions.

Nor is Europe distant, since Spain alone registered 325,254 Venezuelan nationals by January 2024, up from just over 40,000 a decade earlier,[25] while Venezuelans lodged almost 190,000 EU+ asylum applications between October 2023 and January 2026, over 90% in Spain.[26] Venezuela's future therefore has implications for Europe, from human mobility and regional stability to its own geopolitical position.

On 15 July 2026, Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, visited Caracas. The Commission committed EUR 20 million more for humanitarian aid and search and rescue, on top of EUR 5 million from late June after a previous commitment of EUR 52 million, some EUR 77 million in total. Two flights carried almost 80 tonnes of supplies, and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism mobilised 750 specialists from 18 countries, demonstrating real capacity.[27]

That capacity was badly needed, since Venezuela's rescue effort relied heavily on informal groups of volunteers, including retired firefighters, medical workers and ordinary citizens, who searched damaged neighbourhoods as the disaster overwhelmed the state's response.[28] Their mobilisation showed both how stretched that capacity was and that Europe already has a substantial presence to build on. Yet it has remained confined to crisis management. Since 2016, the EU has allocated more than EUR 577 million in humanitarian assistance to Venezuela, without formulating any comprehensive strategy for transforming the conflict.[29]

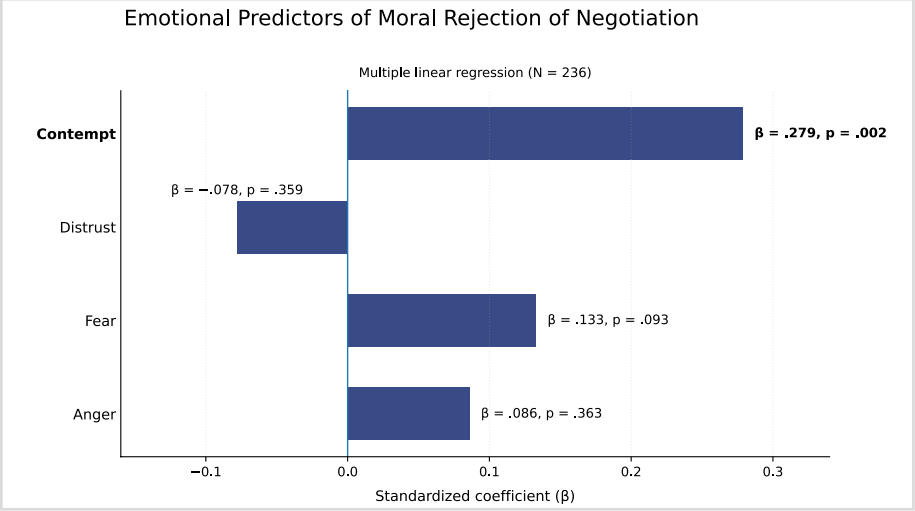
REORIENTING EUROPE'S INSTRUMENTS

The humanitarian response remains indispensable but should constitute an element of a broader strategy aimed at the patterns sustaining Venezuela's intractability. They include identity built against the adversary, normalised contempt, existential threat, institutional capture, fragmented actors, unresolved trauma, repeated escalation and political entrapment.[30]

INFOBOX

About the Survey

This survey tested whether the relational dimension of the conflict could be observed empirically. It was distributed online through snowball sampling. Chavista respondents were harder to reach, and several were cautious about taking part, which probably contributed to an underrepresentation of chavista respondents in the sample. A professional polling firm will conduct a follow-up survey using a representative sample.



Contempt is the strongest emotional predictor of rejecting negotiation. When all four emotions were considered together, only contempt remained statistically significant (author's own compilation).

Note: Standardised coefficients from a linear regression model predicting a reliable three-item scale of moral rejection of negotiation (α = .925). N = 236; R^2 = .145. Contempt was the only statistically significant emotional predictor (p = .002).

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Reconstruction funding could be made conflict-sensitive, so it does not deepen identity divisions or fragmentation among political and social actors. European diplomacy could support dialogue below the elite level, among victims' groups, churches and civil society, where the conflict is lived daily. Justice mechanisms, including the Facility on Justice in Conflict and Transition,[31] could combine accountability with the return of exiles and safeguards against reprisal. Institutional support could focus on transparency, participation and credible guarantees.

Europe has the means and an evident interest in acting, but the open question is whether it will turn them into sustained engagement beyond crisis response, since such conflicts change only slowly as the dynamics sustaining them lose their hold. This requires what John Paul Lederach calls *moral imagination*, the capacity to remain grounded in conflict while imagining relationships and political possibilities that do not yet exist.[32]

Development cooperation can give this approach a practical form by linking relief to institutional change, not by building a separate transition process, but by ensuring that reconstruction, justice and institutional support do not reproduce the same patterns under a new arrangement.

A NARROW WINDOW

None of this will be quick. Europe cannot resolve from outside what Venezuelans have been unable to resolve from within, but it can help prevent the current redistribution of power from reproducing the same conflict in a different form. Reconstruction should therefore be treated not only as an emergency response, but as an opportunity to confront the dynamics that made collapse possible.

Europe's most valuable contribution may be to help turn the displacement of power into the beginning of conflict transformation, rather than the next chapter of the same conflict.

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