

Democratic crisis in Venezuela

Resolution adopted by the EPP Political Assembly, Copenhagen, Denmark,
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As the political, economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela continues to worsen, the European People's Party strongly declares its support for the country's democratic institutions, its solidarity with the suffering Venezuelan people and their democratically elected representatives and its insistence on a return to constitutional order and governance. The recently installed "Communal Constituent Assembly" — chosen in a dubious 30 July election denounced by the company conducting the electronic voting as a fake election, whose legitimacy the European Union, along with many other observers, has not recognised and which others have denounced as a coup d'état — has assumed legislative powers and been tasked with re-writing the constitution, all in order to legitimise President Nicolás Maduro's further consolidation of power; this process is meant to undermine what remains of Venezuela's democratic order, and the EPP rejects it unequivocally. It is long past time for the Maduro regime to heed the voices of the Venezuelan people. It is time for a clear timetable for free and fair national elections.

Questions were raised even in 2013 regarding the legitimacy of President Maduro's election. In December 2015, the opposition won a clear majority in the National Assembly: both that majority and the institution of the National Assembly itself have been subsequently, and systematically, undermined through regime-supported intimidation and judicial decree. Now, after years of mismanagement and corruption, with the economy contracting and inflation soaring, with medicine and food becoming scarce, with thousands of desperate citizens seeking help abroad and with hundreds of thousands participating in protests against the regime, President Maduro and his cronies have found new ways to circumvent democracy.

Since April of this year, 125 people have died in protests — including at least ten on the date of the vote for the Constituent Assembly — with thousands more injured or detained. Following the 30 July vote, opposition leader Leopoldo López and former Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma were arrested. Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz, now in exile, was removed in August by the Constituent Assembly, a result of her criticism of the regime. The United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS) have acknowledged thousands of cases of torture and crimes against humanity.

International opposition to President Maduro's efforts to undermine Venezuelan democracy has been clear, and increasing.

- On 30 March 2017, the Centrist Democrat International (IDC-CDI) expressed grave concerns over the Venezuelan Supreme Court's attempt at the end of March to essentially dissolve the National Assembly. On 4 April, the IDC-CDI denounced the political detention of Roberto Enriquez, President of Venezuelan opposition party, and IDC-CDI member party, COPEI.
- On 7 April 2017, the Union of Latin American Parties (UPLA), supported by the International Democrat Union (IDU), of which the EPP is also a member, condemned the actions taken by Venezuela's Supreme Court.
- On 27 April 2017, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly — 450 to 35, with 100 abstentions — for a resolution calling on the Venezuelan government to restore constitutional order to the country, including respect for the separation of powers; to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners; to provide an electoral timetable, in compliance with the constitution, outlining a plan for a free and transparent electoral process; to provide security and protect the basic rights and freedoms of all citizens; and to allow urgently needed humanitarian aid into the country. The resolution — the European Parliament's fifth regarding the crisis in Venezuela under President Maduro — also reiterated an urgent request that a European Parliament delegation be sent to the country, and for a dialogue to be held as soon as possible with all relevant parties. In his press conference following the vote, alongside Venezuelan National Assembly President Julio Borges, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani also noted the recent additional US sanctions against members of Venezuela's Supreme Court, suggesting the European Union could move towards similar actions as well.

- On 31 May 2017, EPP Group Chairman Manfred Weber called for free elections supported by international observers, for the harassment of the National Assembly to stop and for the release of political prisoners; and he recalled the EPP Group's long and vocal support for Venezuelan democracy and freedom.
- Following the violent attacks, on 5 July 2017, by armed Maduro supporters against members of the National Assembly, the IDU and the ICD-CDI issued strong and unequivocal condemnations. EPP Secretary General Antonio López-Istúriz condemned the violence in a speech in the European Parliament's plenary session, suggesting a clear European response — including the possibility of sanctions — against the Maduro regime.
- Ahead of the vote for the Constituent Assembly on 30 July 2017, European Parliament President Tajani stated that the Parliament could not recognise the election — as more than 7 million Venezuelan citizens had clearly expressed their opposition to it in an unofficial plebiscite in mid-July; and he again mentioned the possibility of targeted sanctions against senior government officials, expressing the European Parliament's willingness to work with the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Vatican, among other potential partners, in resolving the crisis.
- After the vote for the Constituent Assembly, the European External Action Service condemned the Venezuelan authorities' excessive use of force during the ensuing protests. High Representative Federica Mogherini later added that the European Union — with the additional support of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia — could not recognise the Constituent Assembly, whose democratic legitimacy was in serious doubt; and she called on the Maduro regime to release jailed political opponents, and for all democratic representatives and institutions in Venezuela to exercise their responsibilities and to work towards successful negotiations.
- On 5 August 2017, MERCOSUR indefinitely suspended Venezuela from its trading bloc, urging the freeing of political prisoners and a return to constitutional democratic order. The OAS — which had earlier expressed grave concerns over the threats to democracy taking place in Venezuela, and which on 3 August issued a press statement making clear that Venezuela would not be invited to the Inter-American Meeting of Electoral Authorities in October 2017 — supported this move.
- On 8 August 2017, high-ranking representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay and Peru signed a statement declaring Venezuela's Constituent Assembly to be illegitimate, recognising the democratically elected National Assembly and supporting the recent decision by MERCOSUR to suspend Venezuela indefinitely. The gathering also formed the basis for an ad hoc group to monitor the crisis, to convene officially in September in New York during the United Nations General Assembly.
- On 8 August 2017, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein called for the release of those Venezuelans detained for exercising their basic rights, following a report by his team detailing widespread, systemic abuse of force by the Maduro regime; and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres urged the renewal of negotiations between the regime and the opposition.
- On 9 August 2017, the United States sanctioned eight individuals in the Maduro regime for their role in the creation of the Constituent Assembly; on 25 August, the US administration restricted the Venezuelan government's access to American financing, banning debt trades for new bonds issued by the state-run oil company Petróleos de Venezuela SA, and for all bonds, new or existing, issued by the Venezuelan government itself.

Given the increasing severity of the political, economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela — brought on by the incompetence, corruption and authoritarianism of the Maduro regime — the EPP firmly resolves the following:

- Calls on all parties involved, both internal and external to Venezuela, to pursue non-violent means of dialogue and negotiation in trying to solve the current crisis;
- Urges the government to attend to the worsening humanitarian situation facing its citizens, allowing international aid to reach those who desperately need it;
- Demands the immediate and unconditional release of all those Venezuelans persecuted, detained or imprisoned for political reasons;
- Denounces as democratically illegitimate the Constituent Assembly and its efforts to usurp legislative authority and undermine Venezuela's constitution;
- Declares the EPP's solidarity with the democratically elected members of the National Assembly, demanding that the Assembly's legislative function be fully reinstated and that Venezuela's security forces protect its members against political violence of any kind;
- Demands an end to political persecution against the many judges, governors, mayors and other legitimate representatives who have been prevented from taking office, forced into exile or jailed; these representatives must be allowed to resume their constitutional office and function;
- Calls for a clear and official timetable outlining constitutional procedures for free, fair and transparent national elections;
- Acknowledges and condemns the organised crime — including arms and narcotrafficking linked to terrorism, and to the illegal financing of political parties outside of Venezuela — alleged to exist within senior levels of the Maduro regime;
- Reiterates the call for a European Parliament delegation to visit Venezuela and fully report on the situation there;
- Urges the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to revise Venezuela's status during its September meetings; and urges, if this is not done, the European Union to reconsider its participation in the EU-CELAC Summit planned for October 2017;
- Charges the European Parliament and the European Commission with preparing specific options for targeted sanctions against senior members of the Maduro regime, or with regard to specific channels or capabilities through which the regime maintains its control: these sanctions should be clearly announced and then swiftly implemented insofar as the regime continues to disregard the basic freedoms of its citizens, to flout democratic principles and to upend Venezuela's constitutional order.

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