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THE IMPACT OF THE NON-LIBERAL RULE OF NICOLAS MADURO IN VENEZUELA ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN MOSCOW AND CARACAS

ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to show how the peculiarities of the Venezuelan political system, expressed by Nicolas Maduro and implemented by forces concentrated around this person, affect international security. The article shows that there is a close correlation between the illiberal political system of contemporary Venezuela and the behavior of the authorities of this country on the international forum. The degree of military involvement of the Russian Federation in Venezuela was assessed. It has been shown that the political system of contemporary Venezuela is petrified by the features of the authoritarian system; thus these features become the source of its weakness. This, in turn, enables countries supporting Maduro's rule to strengthen their positions in this country, which Russia also benefits from. Russia benefits, however, from this situation with a visible reserve resulting from the awareness of the total economic inertia of this, nominally, one of Latin America's richest countries. It was emphasized that Moscow is increasingly taking a wait-and-see position towards Caracas, realizing the growing uncertainty about the investments made so far in the country.

KEYWORDS: Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, Russian Federation, authoritarian regime

ODDZIAŁYWANIE NIELIBERALNYCH RZĄDÓW NICOLASA MADURO W WENEZUELI NA BEZPIECZEŃSTWO MIĘDZYNARODOWE W PERSPEKTYWIE WSPÓŁPRACY MOSKWY I CARACAS

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, jak cechy szczególne systemu politycznego Wenezueli, którego wyrazicielem jest Nicolas Maduro, zaś realizatorem siły skupione wokół jego osoby oddziałują na bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe. W pracy wykazano, że istnieje ścisła współzależność pomiędzy nieliberalnym systemem politycznym współczesnej Wenezueli a postępowaniem władz tego państwa na forum międzynarodowym. Dokonano oceny stopnia militarnego zaangażowania Federacji Rosyjskiej w Wenezueli. Wykazano, że system polityczny współczesnej Wenezueli petrifikują cechy ustroju autorytarnego stając się tym samym źródłem jej słabości. Ta z kolei umożliwia państwom wspierającym rządy Maduro wzmocnienie swoich pozycji w tym państwie, z czego korzysta również Rosja. Czyni to wszakże z widoczną rezerwą wynikającą ze świadomości całkowitego bezwładnego gospodarstwa tego nominalnie jednego z najbogatszych państw Ameryki Łacińskiej. Podkreślono, że Moskwa w coraz większym stopniu przyjmuje pozycję wyczekującą wobec Caracas, zdając sobie sprawę z rosnącej niepewności związanej z poczynionymi dotychczas inwestycjami w tym państwie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Wenezuela, Nicolas Maduro, Federacja Rosyjska, reżim autorytarny

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the political situation in Venezuela since February 1999, that is since Hugo Chavez took power, has still been of interest to both political scientists, journalists, and international public opinion.¹ This interest was strengthened when the successor of Chavez as head of state, Nicolas Maduro, was sworn in for the first presidential term in 2013. The presidential election and the inauguration of the second term in 2019 coincided with the rapidly worsening economic crisis in the country. Since the May 2018 presidential election in Venezuela, both the foreign media and the public have circulated press materials showing countless demonstrations, marches, and rallies of hundreds of thousands of supporters and opponents of the current rule.

The events related to the crisis in this South American country are treated by the vast majority of Europeans as a manifestation of a distant political exotic, and the political and economic problems of this country seem, in the opinion of many people, to generate challenges and threats only of an internal nature, mainly concerning the Venezuelans themselves and the countries of the region. Outside observers focus only on the pictures juxtaposing the poverty of the favelas surrounding Caracas with the neighborhoods inhabited by the richest men and on the constitutional crisis, the main actors of which are, on the one hand, the current president, Nicolas Maduro, and on the other, the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaido, recognized by many countries around the world and the European Union as the provisional president of the country. Currently in Venezuela, there is a paradoxical situation of apparent dual power, when Juan Guaido on the one hand and Nicolas Maduro on the other are perceived by different countries as the incumbent president. While a group of countries, led by the United States, Brazil, and members of the European Union, consider the presidential election of May 2018, which resulted in Maduro's victory by a majority of 67%, as rigged and recognize Juan Guaido as interim president, counterpoint countries such as Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and Turkey declare their support for Nicolas Maduro. Such a division of support may lead to the conclusion that the attitude of individual countries to the political and economic crisis of contemporary Venezuela is a simple emanation of the rivalry of countries, in which the state systems are respectively closer to both democracy and authoritarianism. It should also be noted that contemporary researchers of the political system are particularly fascinated not only by the political system established in Venezuela after 1999 and the Bolivarian revolution, but also by the widely understood phenomenon of the unique and charismatic Hugo Chavez as a person. Hence, these issues have received a considerable amount of analysis and research devoted to them².

¹ Since the entry into force of the new constitution (1999), the official name of the country is the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

² These issues are addressed, inter alia, by: M. Derham, *Politics in Venezuela: Explaining Hugo Chávez*, Bern 2010; J. Trak, *Venezuela: Changes and Continuities in Post-Chavez Era*, [in:] A. Freire, M. Barragán, X. Collier, M. Lisi, E. Tsatsanis, *Political Representation in Southern Europe and Latin America*, London, 2020; D. Hellinger, A. Petros Spanakos, *The legacy of Hugo Chavez*, "Latin American Perspectives" 2016, 44(1); R. Carroll, *Comandante: Hugo Chávez's Venezuela*, New York 2014; M. Gonzalez, *Hugo Chavez: Socialist for the Twenty-first Century*, London 2014; A. Brewer-Carías, *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela. The Chávez Authoritarian*

The aim of the article, however, is not to analyze the geopolitical conditions of support expressed for both sides of the conflict in Venezuela, but to show how the features of the political system, which is expressed by Nicolas Maduro, who is still in power, influence, both directly and indirectly, on international security in particular - the importance of Moscow's military involvement in Venezuela. The author wants to answer the questions whether, firstly, Nicolas Maduro can be classified as a typical authoritarianist, and second, what challenges are generated by the contemporary policy of the Venezuelan government for the international community, in particular in the field of military and political cooperation with Russia. As will be shown later in this paper, there is a close correlation between the political system of contemporary Venezuela and the behavior of the authorities of this country on the international forum. The author also intends to show what factors cause that despite such adversities as a drastic decline in GDP related to the reduction of oil production and a drop in oil prices on the stock exchanges, omnipresent corruption, the failure of many years of economic policy aimed at unsuccessful nationalization, symbolized by the fall of one of the world's largest oil companies, PDVSA, and ultimately violating human rights, Venezuela with Nicolas Maduro in power is still seen by some countries as a noteworthy economic partner and political ally. The article describes the extent to which the links between Maduro's power system and Russia pose a threat to the current international order. The aim of this paper is not to identify the peculiarities of the political system in contemporary Venezuela, as this issue will be the subject of a separate analysis.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VENEZUELA'S NON-LIBERAL SYSTEM OF POWER IN THE TIMES OF NICOLAS MADURO'S GOVERNANCE

The author formulates a research hypothesis that, despite the widespread perception of Nicolas Maduro as an authoritarianist, Maduro is not a typical or rather a model authoritarianist. Nevertheless, the essence of the political system it represents is the deepening of ties with illiberal states. However, it is worth emphasizing that he undoubtedly uses numerous mechanisms to gain and maintain power, typical of authoritarian regimes, while in the system of modern Venezuela some features of an authoritarian state can be discerned. The view of Milan Svoblik should also be recalled, according to which Venezuela has been the *de jure* and *de facto* dictatorship since the rule of Hugo Chavez. He emphasizes that: "Hugo Chavez, for instance, managed to turn Venezuela into a dictatorship by suppressing the press, intimidating opposition, and manipulating electoral laws [...]"³. However, paradoxically, Chavez took power in 1999 in a democratic manner.

Experiment, Cambridge 2010; R. Gott, *Hugo Chavez: The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela*, London 2005; A. Serbin, A. Serbin Pont, *The Foreign Policy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: The Role and Legacy of Hugo Chávez*, "Latin American Policy", 2017 8(2).

³ M. W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge 2012, p. 24.

In the context of seeing Nicolas Maduro as an authoritarian, reference should be made to defining, by the doctrinal representatives, the peculiarities of an authoritarian system of governance. If we believe Roman Tokarczyk's findings on authoritarianism: "In political thought, authoritarianism rejects anarchism, liberalism, democratism and parliamentarism because it praises the strong executive power of political authority, enforces the necessity of absolute submission of subordinates to the state power, expects respect and praise for the government of outstanding individuals or small elite groups. [...] Authoritarianism is unconcerned with the procedural legitimacy of the subjects of authoritarian power, contenting itself with the mere possession and perpetuation of that power and combating opposition if it has already allowed it to survive, emerge and exist"⁴. In the aforementioned text, Roman Tokarczyk also stresses the importance of authority in the exercise of power, concluding that: "[...] authoritarianism is a negative manifestation of the abuse of authority in political thought and practice"⁵. Hence, the author claims, which he will try to prove in further considerations, that although Nicolas Maduro may be classified as an authoritarianist, he cannot be considered a classical authoritarianist, as he does not have the authority mentioned by Roman Tokarczyk. The lack of this authority makes him a politician who is completely dependent in ideological, political and program terms on the political legacy of his predecessor - for without doubt Hugo Chavez had social authority and political charisma. The lack of broadly understood social respect along with a specific political vagueness forces Maduro, on the one hand, to permanently play the role of the heir to the leader of the Bolivarian revolution, at the same time contributing to the petrification of social, economic and political crises and pathologies within the state, and on the other hand – to necessarily legitimize himself with strong allies on the international political stage.

Recognition of the political system in Venezuela under Nicolas Maduro's rule as undemocratic is indicated, inter alia, by the circumstances of the 2018 presidential elections, during which the opposition accused the government of electoral fraud. In addition, the opposition parties were blocked from proposing a joint presidential candidate; the blockade forced opposition politicians to split votes. Two important events also speak in favor of assigning authoritarian features to Venezuela's political system during the reign of Nicolas Maduro. The first was that the socialists lost the parliamentary elections in 2015 for the Democratic Unity Coalition, which resulted in the Supreme Court, favoring the head of state, depriving the National

⁴ R. Tokarczyk, *Autorytaryzm – dociekanie istoty pojęcia*, „Historia i Polityka”, 2010, No. 2-3 (9-10), p. 37. Roman Tokarczyk also points out that “The almost indisputable features of all authoritarian regimes include: recognizing the sovereignty of one's own country as the highest political value that requires ideological and constitutional confirmation; basing politics on the content of traditional morality agreed with religion; approving of the strong power of an individual or a small group as guardians of the interests of the entire society, without the need for a parliament the conviction that the bonds of social solidarity play a key role and therefore concepts that highlight social conflicts should be rejected; reliance on the liberal model of the market economy as the material foundation for all manifestations of politics.” *Ibidem*, p. 38. Although not all of the above-mentioned features can be seen in contemporary Venezuela, there is no doubt that in many features the present system of this country can be perceived as close to authoritarianism. The typology of authoritarian regimes proposed by Juan Linz [in:] *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes with a major new introduction*, Boulder 2000, pp. 159 et seq.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

Assembly, opposing Maduro, of legislative powers in March 2017. The court's decision allowed the president to govern by decrees⁶. Reaching for this form of the governance by the executive branch of government, controlled by supporters of Hugo Chavez, allows us to see in Nicolas Maduro's actions the features of legal nihilism most often found in systems close to authoritarianism or totalitarianism⁷.

It should also be recalled that, pursuant to the decree of the head of state, on 30 July 2017, the elections to the Constituent Assembly were held, which the opposition considered undemocratic.

The person of Venezuela's current president, Nicolas Maduro, is widely regarded the successor or political successor of Hugo Chavez, who died in 2013. Such comparisons can be considered fully justified, because Chavez gradually strengthened the political position of Nicolas Maduro with the progression of the disease and performed a kind of anointing of this long-time trade union activist born in Caracas in 1962 as his successor. Of course, the person of Nicolas Maduro cannot be described as a man from nowhere, who was suddenly moved to the second position in the state. He was in fact associated with the center around Chavez from the early 1990s, cooperating first, with the previously classified Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement - 200, and then in the presidential campaign in 1998, Lieutenant Colonel Chavez, who was no longer in active service, as a co-organizer of the Fifth Republic Movement. It was on behalf of this party that he obtained a mandate in the Chamber of Deputies in 1999, and later in the National Assembly, which passed the new constitution. Since 2007, he has been representing the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Thanks to Chavez's support, he gradually took the most responsible and influential positions in parliament and the executive. For a year, that is, from January 2005 to January 2006, he was the chairman of the Venezuelan National Assembly, and in July 2006 he became the Minister of Foreign Affairs, being appointed to this

⁶ See more: L. Reyes, *Con sentencias 155 y 156, TSJ habilita al presidente Maduro a legislar y bloquea a la AN*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170402000653/http://efectococuyo.com/politica/con-sentencias-155-y-156-tsj-habilita-al-presidente-maduro-a-legislar-y-bloquea-a-la-an>, (06.01.2021). Also: R. Romo, *Venezuela's high court dissolves National Assembly*, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/>, (06.01.2020). Michael McCarty points out that: "The Supreme Court became the government's judicial shield, knocking down every piece of politically significant legislation passed by the Assembly. The opposition's power as a congressional majority was strictly symbolic." See: M. McCarthy, *The Venezuela Crisis and Latin America's Future: Toward a Robust Hemispheric Agenda on Democratic Stability*, Wilson Center, p. 16, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mccarthy_venezuela_crisis_final.pdf, (01.16.2021).

⁷ One should point out the view expressed in the doctrine by Adam Bosiacki, according to which the characteristic features of legal nihilism include: free shaping of the system of norms by the rulers; the government's desire to break free from restrictive regulations allowing the powers of the central decision-making center not to be derived from the constitution; unclear indication of the competences of public administration bodies; broad formulation of general clauses; administrative repression; contempt for the provisions of applicable law; radical break with the current legal order. Cf.: A. Bosiacki, *Między nihilizmem prawnym a socjalistycznym normatywizmem. Z rozważań nad koncepcją prawa państwa stalinowskiego*, [in:] M. Mikołajczyk (ed.), *O prawie i jego dziejach księgi dwie. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Adamowi Lityńskiemu w czterdziestopięciolate pracy naukowej i siedemdziesięciolecie urodzin*, t. 2, Białystok-Katowice 2010, p. 117 et seq.; *idem*, *Utopia, władza, prawo. Doktryna i koncepcje prawne bolszewickiej Rosji 1917–1921*, Warszawa 2012, p. 145 et seq. Also on the subject of legal nihilism, see: W. Kowalski, *From May to Berezna: A Legal Nihilism in the Political and Legal Practice of the Sanation Camp 1926–1935*, "Studia Iuridica Lublinensia" XXIX(5), 2020, p. 133 et seq, DOI: 10.17951/sil.2020.29.5.133-147. The above-mentioned features of legal nihilism can be seen in the systemic and legal practice of contemporary Venezuela.

position by Hugo Chavez, who was also the head of the administration as head of state. Finally, until March 2013, he was the vice president of the state. It should be emphasized that by assuming this position in October 2012, de jure and de facto, the intended transposition of power by Chavez, who is struggling with cancer, took place. It is worth mentioning that, as early as 2012, the ailing Chavez pointed explicitly to Maduro as his successor, the leader of the Bolivarian revolution to date. As is well known, the death of the long-standing President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, in 2013 was the finalization of the gradual preparation, which had already been under way for a year, of Nicolas Maduro as his successor and heir to his political authority.

There is no doubt that Nicolas Maduro is an authoritarian and this perception of him by scholars such as Michael McCarthy or Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales is not an incorrect position.⁸ It should be emphasized that authoritarianism in Latin America is not a new phenomenon, the countries of the continent have experienced more or less bloody forms of implementation of the authoritarian doctrine since the 1920s, the characteristic features of which are the lack of respect for human rights, especially forced disappearances, constant coups of states carried out by the armed forces or the governments of all kinds of military junts⁹. It should be brought to mind that Maduro's political mentor, Hugo Chavez, also in his career tried – then unsuccessfully – to take power by way of a military coup in 1992.

The presented considerations should be supplemented with the conclusion that there are attempts to create authority by Nicolas Maduro. One of the manifestations of this activity is the presentation of the president in the pro-government media as the head of state, a strong leader, with whom ordinary, poor citizens, who are the political base of Hugo Chavez political camp, will continue to identify. This is the purpose, to which the narrative presenting Maduro as an average citizen is supposed to serve. This is why there are reports and photographs in the media showing the President as a bus driver carrying members of his electoral staff, a clear reference to the profession of driver he has held for many years¹⁰. At the same time, it is to build an image of a leader who continues to do physical work. In this way, a bond is created with workers and the poorest social class who make the majority of voters of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Regarding the question, mentioned in the introduction, of the reasons for the astonishing ability of Nicolas Maduro – in the face of pressure from the opposition, the international community and the ruthless economy – to remain in power for such a paradoxically long time, it is worth recalling that, according to Heather Matrin, the factors that enabled the mentor of the current president, Hugo Chavez, to remain at the helm of power for fourteen years were: “[...] social programs to secure and maintain the support of the electorate and political incentives in the form of key positions in government for key supportive inner circles. Policy changes include

⁸ M. McCarthy, *op. cit.*. Also: B. Bull, A. Rosales, *The crisis in Venezuela: Drivers, transitions, and pathways*, “European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies” 2020, No. 109 January-June, p. 4.

⁹ It should be mentioned, inter alia, the tragic balance of the rule of generals Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973-1990, Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina in 1976-1981 or Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay in 1954-1989.

¹⁰ BBC, *Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro: Dictator or defender of socialism?* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-20664349> (13.12.2020).

constitutional amendments on presidential term limits, expanded executive powers, and restrictions on freedom of speech. [...] Coup-proofing techniques that Chavez has used to stay in office include the use of religious, ethnic and social classes to create a strong support base, increased security or militia spending, frequent purges of officers in the military, incentives for the military by making pay increases and using the military as a tool of intimidation”¹¹.

In the analyzed case of Nicolas Maduro, the above catalog of activities aimed at staying in power will be partially up-to-date. However, this general statement is worth nuancing and emphasizing that, first, unlike Chavez, Nicolas Maduro is not a professional military man and therefore does not naturally regard the armed forces as a natural reservoir of support for Hugo Chavez’s political camp. On the other hand, without the support of the Armed Forces of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Maduro’s fall would be a doomed fact, which he is well aware of; there is no doubt that the key guarantee for supporters of Hugo Chavez to maintain in power is the absolute support of the armed forces. Researchers such as Marcin Gawrycki and Alicja Fijałkowska point out that the unique role of the army was inherent in the initial assumptions of Bolivarianism. They emphasize that: “[...] Chavez’s Bolivarianism is an anti-oligarchic, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-colonial and in a sense anti-capitalist movement [...]. In addition, it can be added that Chavez constructed a state model as a joint civil-military project, although, as Jennifer McCoy points out, Chavez rejected the model of direct control of society by the armed forces (quasi-dictatorship) in favor of << a new model - open participation of the military in the civilian government >>”¹². In addition, both during the rule of Chavez and Maduro, the process of decentralization (sic!) or even disintegration of the command structures of the armed forces is progressing, which, according to the leaders of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, is to prevent the success of a possible coup d’état. According to estimates by Brian Ellsworth and Mayela Armas, 2,000 generals and admirals are currently active in the Bolivarian armed forces¹³.

As you know, since 1998, i.e. from the time Hugo Chavez took over the government, the so-called the Bolivarian revolution, which as a political and social movement, despite its undeniable successes, over time led one of the richest countries in Latin America to a state close to

¹¹ H. Martin, *Coup-Proofing and Beyond: The Regime-Survival Strategies of Hugo Chavez*, “Latin American Policy” 2017 8(2), p. 260. Heather Martin also emphasizes the importance of the ownership transformations, including: in the area of distribution with arable land and the use of nationalization of private enterprises, *ibidem*. As a kind of curiosity, it should be noted that the nationalization of banks and private enterprises in Venezuela has become a specific hallmark of the charismatic Chavez, often presented in the weekly *Alo Presidente* program broadcast by the president on the state television. The findings made by Paul Lewis should also be recalled, emphasizing that the supporters of Hugo Chavez have always had the key support of the armed forces. “The military was another crucial element. Its commands were reshuffled, and officers suspected of disloyalty were forced into retirement. Chavez’s friends, on the other hand, were put in charge of key garrisons, and many of them were given important positions in his government.” Cf.: P. Lewis, *Authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Dictators, despots, and tyrans*, Oxford 2006, p. 244.

¹² A. Fijałkowska, M. Gawrycki, *Wenezuela w procesie (r)ewolucyjnych przemian*, Warsaw 2010, p. 23. The authors refer to the position of Jennifer McCoy expressed in: *Chavez and the end of partyarchy in Venezuela*, “Journal of Democracy” 10(3), pp. 64-77.

¹³ B. Ellsworth, M. Armas, *REUTERS Special Report: The Maduro mystery: Why the armed forces still stand by Venezuela’s beleaguered president*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-military-specialreport-idUSKCN1TT1O4>, (03.02.2021).

obtaining the status of a failed state. The collapse of crude oil prices on international markets has caused the state to be constantly affected by shortages in electricity supplies, and the rampant hyperinflation and poorly developed food industry in the face of the lack of available financial reserves mean that over 64% of households live in multidimensional poverty (sic!)¹⁴.

It seems that the situation in this distant South American country will not have significant implications for the economic and military security of the international community. In fact, it should be remembered that the political and economic stabilization in Venezuela is important not only for the security of its people and countries in the region, but also for the global economy. It is enough to recall that it is in this country that the largest, estimated at around 300 billion barrels, oil deposits in the world (sic!) are located¹⁵. As you know, it was the total economic dependence on the export of hydrocarbons as a source of foreign exchange that meant that the country that produced 3,280,000 barrels of oil per day in 1997¹⁶, in 2019 had a daily production of only 918 barrels per day, compared to 11,832,000 barrels of oil in Saudi Arabia¹⁷. Currently, with the long-term decline in oil prices, Venezuela's economy is almost entirely dependent on revenues from the export of petroleum products, generating negligible revenues. There is a constant humanitarian crisis in the country that has caused the emigration of more than 3 million Venezuelans. The course of rapprochement with Russia, China, and Iran, introduced by Chavez and continued by Maduro, is not without significance. The economy struggling with the economic crisis is being hit by the embargo and economic sanctions imposed by the United States¹⁸.

The previously indicated features characterizing the model of exercising power by both Nicolas Maduro and the Khawist power camp create a peculiar amalgam of ubiquitous corruption typical of authoritarian and quasi authoritarian systems of Latin America¹⁹, inefficiency of

¹⁴ Source of data: Reuters, *Venezuela poverty rate surges amid economic collapse, inflation – study*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-poverty/venezuela-poverty-rate-surges-amid-economic-collapse-inflation-study-idUSL1N2EE1MG?edition-redirect=in>, (09.01.2021). International Monetary Fund data estimate unemployment in Venezuela in 2021 at 35.5%. *Venezuela Datasets*, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/VEN>, (24.01.2021).

¹⁵ *Top ten countries with the world's largest oil reserves, from Venezuela to Iraq*, See.: <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/features/newstop-ten-countries-with-worlds-largest-oil-reserves-5793487/>, (13.12.2020). It should be noted that the estimated deposits of crude oil in Venezuela constitute over 17% of the world's reserves of this commodity, slightly more than in Saudi Arabia. Currently, due to the decrease in oil prices in the world in 2018, Venezuela is not financially able to maintain the current exploitation of the oil fields. The completely outdated mining infrastructure and the lack of competent staff in the state-owned PdVSA concern, which is a kind of a victim of Hugo Chavez's human resources policy, are also not conducive to the exploitation of oil fields. In turn, according to OPEC data, proven oil reserves in Venezuela constitute as much as 25.5% of world crude oil reserves. *Vide e.g.*: https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm, (24.01.2021).

¹⁶ *Venezuela Crude Oil Production by Year*, <https://www.indexmundi.com/energy/?country=ve&product=oil&graph=production>, (13.12.2020).

¹⁷ *Statistical Review of World Energy 2020*, 69th edition, p. 16 et seq., <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2020-full-report.pdf>, (13.12.2020).

¹⁸ The freezing of Venezuela's assets by the United States, introduced by President Donald Trump in August 2019, is particularly severe for the country's economy. In turn, in January 2019, the American administration imposed economic sanctions on the country's largest petrochemical company - PDVSA. He is responsible for the extraction and production of oil and natural gas, while being the largest employer in the country.

¹⁹ According to Alejandro Cardozo Uzcátegui and Víctor M. Mijares, the factor that strengthens economic ties between Russia and Venezuela is supranational corruption. In their opinion: “[...] the web of corruption breeds

public administration affected by a chronic shortage of educated personnel, and finally permanent, even inseparable ties between the authorities and armed forces, which, as happened many times before, both in Venezuela and in other Latin American countries, played and continue to play the role of the main arbiter in possible political disputes.

The above outline of the political realities of today's Venezuela, a peculiar combination of the tragic economic situation, the important role of the Armed Forces, and an ineffective administration willing to use typically authoritarian methods of exercising and maintaining power, was necessary in order to show the implications for international security resulting from the above.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RUSSIA'S MILITARY AND ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN VENEZUELA

It will be a truism to say that authoritarian countries, or quasi-authoritarian countries like Venezuela, generate threats to the international governance to a much greater extent than countries with a democratic system. There is no doubt that as the support for Nicolas Maduro from the increasingly disenchanted electorate continues to decline, the support of the armed forces is playing an increasingly important role in keeping the Hugo Chavez's political camp in power. Julia Buxton emphasizes that the armed forces began to play a particularly important role in the country as soon as Maduro took power. "There was a narrowing of influence around the new president, with the elevation of the military faction of the Bolivarian movement to the detriment of the broader base of the traditional Chavista movement"²⁰. One should also note the lack of support for the Venezuelan government not only from the United States, but also from the vast majority of Latin American countries. This situation has necessitated, ever since the adoption of anti-American rhetoric by Hugo Chavez, the search for allies and new economic partners; in particular, cooperation has been established with non-liberal states, namely the Russian Federation and China. According to Heather Martin: "To achieve his foreign-policy objectives and secure his political survival, Chavez spent the last decade of his presidency building and strengthening political and military alliances with Cuba, Iran, China, and Russia"²¹.

The consequences of this process also include the increased importance for Russia in particular of Nicolas Maduro remaining in power. The country pays particular attention to maintaining the status quo in Venezuela, realizing that guaranteeing the survival and support of the armed forces to the Maduro camp is essential for maintaining significant economic, political, and military influence of the Russian Federation, especially in connection with the collapse in

a versatile amalgam that strengthens the Russian position in Latin America, providing aid to Maduro's government. It is a transnational network of sectorial and personal interests whose facilitating feature is corruption." Cf.: A. Uzcátegui, V. Mijares, *The versatile amalgam: Interests and corruption in Russia-Venezuela relations*, "European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies" 2020, No. 109, p. 184.

²⁰ J. Buxton, *Continuity and change in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*, "Third World Quarterly" 2020 41(8), p. 1269.

²¹ H. Martin, *Coup-Proofing and Beyond: The Regime-Survival Strategies of Hugo Chavez*, "Latin American Policy" 2017 8(2), p. 257.

2019 a year sympathetic to the Kremlin by long-time Bolivian president Evo Morales. Undoubtedly, Venezuela is currently the Kremlin's most important ally in Latin America. Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales emphasize that: “Russia has been a more vocal supporter of Maduro, while also frequently displaying its limitations in terms of economic support of the regime. For the Maduro regime, Russia represents a crucial lifeline in terms of credit and symbolic willingness for transborder defense”²². In connection with the above information, the landing of two Russian military machines (Il-62M and AN-124) in the capital of Venezuela on March 23, 2019, which transported unspecified military personnel to the capital, should be in particular recalled.²³ The importance of this event was highlighted in the media, especially since it took place in a difficult political period for Maduro.

The accentuation by Nicolas Maduro, who is almost lonely in the political arena, of close political and military relations, in particular with the Russian Federation, which, regardless of the sanctions imposed, is still a superpower, is intended to enable the achievement of several goals, both on the political and tactical levels. Firstly, emphasizing close ties with the Kremlin, especially military ones, is intended to create the impression that Nicolas Maduro has the support of a militarily strong ally. The addressee of this narrative is especially the countries of the region, and in particular Colombia, perceived by the Chawists as an enemy, and to a much lesser extent the United States. It should be emphasized, in particular, the media effects of the arrival of two Russian Tu-160 strategic bombers at the Maiquetia airport on December 10, 2018²⁴.

Second, to create the impression that the government of modern Venezuela continues to enjoy diplomatic and political recognition from the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Military aid and technological support for domestic plants, in particular those related to the mining sector, which is of key importance for the state, are also important for the Maduro governments, as well as Russian-made weapons systems used by the armed forces.

It should also be remembered that even during the reign of Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan government, using petrodollars, initiated significant purchases of modern military equipment in Russia. In particular, the purchase of S-300VM, BUK M2 anti-aircraft systems, Mi-35M helicopters or SU-30MK2 multi-role aircraft, which has made Venezuela an important customer of the Russian defense industry over the years. According to Eric Rittinger and Matthew Cleary, by 2013 Caracas purchased military equipment, worth over USD 4 billion, in Russia²⁵.

²² B. Bull, A. Rosales, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²³ Cf.: Reuters, *Russian air force planes land in Venezuela carrying troops: reports*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKCN1R50NB>, (09.01.2021). Also: BBC News, *Venezuela crisis: Russian military planes land near Caracas*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47688711>, (09.01.2021); Also: A. Roth, *Russian military arrive in Venezuela to discuss 'training and strategy'*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/25/russian-military-officials-arrive-in-venezuela-to-discuss-training-and-strategy>, (09.01.2021).

²⁴ It should be recalled that the previous visit of Russian strategic bombers to Venezuela took place in October 2013. In turn, in 2008, Russian warships participated in joint exercises with the Venezuelan navy.

²⁵ E. Rittinger, M. Cleary, *Confronting Coup Risk in the Latin American Left*, “Studies in Comparative International Development” 2013 48, pp. 412-413.

The increase in purchases of military equipment took place after 2005, and slowed down in 2014 when Caracas experienced noticeable difficulties in paying its debts to Moscow. It should be recalled that Russia granted Venezuela short-term loans for the purchase of weapons. These transactions also included future oil supplies to Russian companies.

As Peter Cavanagh observes, the present relations between Moscow and Caracas, especially in the sphere of economic cooperation, are characterized by a lack of trust by the Russian side in the credibility of the other party. “The prospects of Russia getting all its money back any time soon from Venezuela is quite low. Due to the severe economic conditions of the country, Venezuela has not been able to continue its payments, so the terms of the debt had to be renegotiated. Since 2014, Moscow has not delivered any new material. After the withdrawal of the giant Russian energy company Rosneft from the country at the beginning of 2020 there have been fewer ways for the Russians to recover the loans. In many respects, this has left Venezuelan-Russian relations at a crossroads. As Venezuela continues to decline rapidly, Russia is faced with deciding whether to continue making large investments in a country where it is tremendously risky or just abandon all efforts which have been made over the past few decades. Only time will tell which course of action the Kremlin will take²⁶”.

However, the effects of tightening political and military relations with Moscow pose challenges to the security of not only the Latin American countries, but also the United States, which are particularly sensitive to any attempts by the Kremlin to establish close relations with the leaders of Latin American countries.

One should also refer to the Russian perception of Venezuela as an ally of the Kremlin. It seems that Russia's approach can be described as characterized by even extreme pragmatism. In Moscow's perception, the current Venezuelan government, despite its declarations, is an extremely unstable economic and political partner, given both the country's customary instability and the catastrophic economic situation that threatens any long-term Russian involvement, especially military. The above reasoning is supported by the fact that Rosneft has withdrawn from investments in Venezuela. In recent years, the concern has supported Caracas not only by providing financial support to the mining sector or by granting financial loans, but also by enabling the export of crude oil from Venezuela through its subsidiaries registered in Switzerland. Rosneft, which is the creditor of Caracas for more than \$ 3 billion, in an effort to maximize profit in other markets, withdrew from involvement in the uncertain project. Russia's pragmatism and long-term operation are evidenced by the fact that the Russian company – which is rightly regarded as closely associated with the Kremlin and shares in numerous projects in this South American country - has sold an undisclosed company controlled by the government of

²⁶ P. Cavanagh, *Russia became an important arms supplier for Latin America, but its sales have dropped*, “Global Affairs Strategic Studies”, <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/russia-became-an-important-arms-supplier-for-latin-america-but-its-sales-have-dropped>, (20.01.2020).

the Russian Federation²⁷. Thus, the Kremlin is striving to leave itself any discretionary freedom in the context of further economic involvement in this country.

It is worth paying attention to the numerous press coverages, which signaled the intention of the Russian Federation to create a permanent air base on the island of La Orchila²⁸. As an aside, it is worth noting that some of these press enunciations were misinformative²⁹. The alarming tone of these coverages seemed to be too exaggerated at the time and did not correspond to the realities of the relations between the two countries and the real intentions of the Kremlin. At present, the military activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are characterized by both pragmatism and a desire to minimize the costs of maintaining its armed forces outside of Russia. This is particularly exemplified by the military situation and Russian military involvement in the Syrian Arab Republic, which has been at war for years. Since September 2015, i.e. since the actual involvement of the Russian armed forces in military operations in Syria, Russia has maintained only two permanent military bases in the country – an air force base in Khmeimim and a naval base in Tartus. Although Russian forces have used or continue to use numerous fortified points in Syria for their operations during the civil war in Syria, they are avoiding the development of a permanent military infrastructure for their needs, preferring to maintain military bases in the coastal muhafazas of Tartus and Latakia, which are easier to operate logistically. In consideration of the above, the establishment of a permanent air force base in Venezuela, at such a considerable distance from Russia, does not make sense. It is worth mentioning that there are Russian soldiers on Venezuela's territory, but according to official announcements, they are there to service military equipment and train the Bolivarian armed forces³⁰.

In the legal dimension, cooperation between the two countries has recently intensified to some extent, which is reflected in the signing of an agreement between the Ministers of Defense of the Russian Federation and Venezuela on August 16, 2019³¹. The purpose of this agreement is to enable the units of the Russian fleet to use local infrastructure and to intensify military cooperation between the states. The actual scope of this cooperation is unknown, as the agreement is not available. Nevertheless, even in the years before the agreement was signed, Russian ships visited their ally's ports. The very fact of signing the aforementioned agreement should not be overestimated, because despite the conclusion of nearly three hundred cooperation agreements between Moscow and Caracas, it seems that the actual involvement of Russia in

²⁷ G. Tétrault-Farber, O. Astakhova, *Rosneft sells Venezuelan assets to Russia after U.S. sanctions ramp up*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-rosneft-venezuela-idUSKBN21F0W2>, (31.01.2021).

²⁸ S. Blank, *Russia's New Venezuelan Base: The Evolving Strategic Context*, <https://sldinfo.com/2018/12/russias-new-venezuelan-base-the-evolving-strategic-context>, (23.02.2021). Also: *Amerykański Przyczółek: Rosja wobec kryzysu w Wenezueli*, <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/amerykanski-przyczolek-rosja-wobec-kryzysu-w-wenezueli/>, (01.02.2021).

²⁹ For example: TASS, *Press review: Russia to set up Caribbean base and meet Israeli brass to discuss Iran*, <https://tass.com/pressreview/1035596>, (25.02.2021).

³⁰ Defence24, *Wenezuela: rotacja rosyjskich specjalistów i nieudana próba puczu*, <https://www.defence24.pl/wenezuela-rotacja-rosyjskich-specjalistow-i-nieudana-proba-puczu>, (23.02. 2021).

³¹ Stratfor, *Russia, Venezuela: Defense Ministers Sign Agreement to Allow Warship Visits, Situation report*, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/russia-venezuela-defense-ministers-sign-agreement-allow-warship-visits>, (20.01.2021).

Venezuela is kept at a minimum level. This is due to the fact that a de facto economically failed state, subject to international sanctions and with such a clearly polarized political scene, and a government whose only survival is guaranteed by the loyalty of the armed forces to the ruling camp cannot and will not be perceived by pragmatic Moscow as a stable political and economic partner. Gestures such as the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergei Lavrov, to Caracas in February 2020, during which negotiations related to the planned signing of further agreements were conducted, will not replace reality.

When assessing Russian involvement, especially military in Venezuela, one can also refer to the activities of the Russian Federation in the Syrian Arab Republic. Although the political situation in both countries is extremely different, because since 2011 Syria has been waging a bloody armed conflict, and the Russian armed forces are officially involved in the military support of Damascus under the international agreement of August 26, 2015³², it seems possible, we can observe certain parallels, consisting in minimizing the Kremlin's military involvement in both countries, while striving to maximize possible profits³³. In the case of Venezuela, however, unlike in Syria, the distance makes it highly unlikely that Russia's increased military involvement in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela should be considered. Moscow's provision of military support to Caracas should be seen as a form of political support designed to keep the Hugo Chavez's political camp and Nicolas Maduro in power. The indicated support partially creates a kind of vicious circle, as the maintenance of close relations with Moscow and Beijing by the Venezuelan authorities is perceived by the United States as a serious threat to the national security of the United States, which in turn translates into the intensification of American economic sanctions.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, it should be stated that it seems justified not to overestimate both the military and economic involvement of Russia in Venezuela, which remains in a condition of deep political and economic crisis. On the other hand, due to the illiberal rule of Nicolas Maduro and the Hugo Chavez's political camp, the country aims to intensify economic and military relations with the Russian Federation - one of its last allies. The support of the armed forces, which, as had happened many times in Latin America, has become a determining factor in foreign policy, is of key importance for Maduro to remain in power. One could risk putting forward the thesis that both *de jure* and *de facto* Caracas has become a hostage to Moscow. Without Moscow's help, it is not only difficult to export crude oil, as it is known, a key source of foreign exchange, but also the operation of the most advanced weapon systems, purchased in Russia during the

³² Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the deployment of an air group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, signed on August 26, 2015 in Damascus, http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?doc_itself=&collection=1&backlink=1&nd=201112839&page=1&rdk=0#I0, (1.02.2021).

³³ This dependency is reflected, inter alia, in the repeated use by the Russian armed forces stationed in Syria of reducing the size of the fleet of combat aircraft stationed at the air force base in Khmeimim.

reign of Hugo Chavez. Maduro's authoritarian system of government is currently unable to win over another ally of such importance as Russia on the international political stage.³⁴ The political system of contemporary Venezuela is petrified by the aforementioned features of the authoritarian system, thus these features become the source of its weakness. This weakness, in turn, enables countries supporting Maduro's rule to strengthen their position in this country, which Russia also benefits from, but it does so with a visible reserve resulting from the awareness of the total economic inertia of this nominally one of Latin America's richest countries. The contemporary system of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is an example of a country close to the system of authoritarian rule, for whose survival it is essential to support Russia. Russia aims both to gain permanent control over oil resources and to obtain a return on investments made so far in this country. Inherent in the inefficiency of the system of government in Venezuela is the permanent need to seek support from other non-liberal states, of which Russia, in particular, is increasingly adopting a wait-and-see attitude.

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³⁴ As it seems, the progressive intensification of economic cooperation with China, whether in the military or economic sphere, will not replace Moscow's support at the moment.

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