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# Referendum in Venezuela - Maduro's dangerous escalation ahead of decisive elections



The north of Latin America could become a zone of escalation of territorial crisis after the referendum in Venezuela last Sunday, which legitimised territorial claims against neighbouring Guyana.

The authoritarian regime of Nicolás Maduro wanted Venezuelans to end a 125-year-old dispute with neighbouring Guyana last Sunday. The government in Caracas claims that it succeeded, and Maduro said that "an overwhelming victory" was achieved.

"We have taken the first steps of a new historic stage in the struggle for what belongs to us, to recover what the liberators left us", said Maduro.

In essence, the referendum was about taking back a sizeable portion of Guyana, which Venezuela believes was traditionally theirs and was taken following the arbitration of 1899, in which they did not participate.

This was about two-thirds of the territory of Guyana, formerly British Guiana (until 1966), a region the size of Austria and the Czech Republic combined.

## Conflict with international law

The referendum result has no prospect of being internationally accepted. First, the voting regarded the decision that directly redraws internationally established borders and violates the sovereignty of an independent state, a member of the UN.

Second, the referendum was conducted in non-transparent conditions, with the absence of democratic control and a questionable result, as proof of the legitimacy of the decision.

The electoral authority said that as many as 95% of voters supported the proposed decisions, but it remains unclear how many Venezuelans actually voted last Sunday.

The State Commission spoke about 10.5 million votes, which would be half of the total electorate. However, the opposition interprets

that only approximately 2 million people voted, given that they answered 5 questions at the polling stations.

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The first direct international conflict that last Sunday's referendum caused was that it directly opposed the UN's International Court of Justice decision, which declared its jurisdiction to resolve the interstate dispute between Venezuela and Guyana last April.

Two days before the referendum, the ICJ **warned** Caracas not to undertake any activities that could change the situation on the ground, precisely referring to the scheduled referendum.

However, the Maduro government disregarded the warning, choosing to hold the referendum even though it would not have international support, risking escalation.

## Maduro's motives for escalation

For the Venezuelan autocrat, the referendum had a dual purpose. Both regard domestic political circumstances and Maduro's attempts to maintain his rule, but now take on a new dimension through cross-border escalation.

Given that presidential elections await Venezuela next year, Maduro wanted to test the state of the electorate with a referendum that would provide him with a more objective picture than regular surveys.

The scenario from the referendum is not very favourable for President Maduro. Despite triumphant official figures of high voter turnout and overwhelming support for the government's referendum question, there were numerous **reports** that polling stations were empty or with few voters.

Also, the decision of state authorities to extend voting for another 2 hours indicates that the turnout was low and that the political apparatus made a desperate attempt to push as many voters as possible to the polls with the extended voting time.

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Another motive affects the forthcoming presidential elections. Maduro's referendum on the issues that have burdened the national sentiment of Venezuela for so long was his attempt to mobilise voters regarding essential national motives, such as territory and nationhood.

The referendum was, in fact, his significant step towards escalating the crisis on the eve of decisive elections in which he will impose himself as the guardian of essential interests, seeking support for himself under the pretext of saving the nation.

“There is no doubt that it is a popular mandate, and it has set a new stage in the fight for our Guayana Essequiba. Now we are going to recover Venezuela's rights over the Essequibo”, Maduro said after announcing the results of the referendum, using the Venezuelan name for the disputed area of Guyana.

## Is a military conflict possible?

There are justified fears that the Venezuelan autocrat, after last Sunday's referendum, has enough time for a military escalation over the disputed region of Guyana if he needed it to manipulate the presidential elections.

As he confirmed, he will use the decision from the past referendum as a clearly expressed national legitimacy, a kind of green light from

the people to take all measures and implement the interests of Venezuela in neighbouring Guyana. Perhaps even militarily if he decides so.

Venezuela's aggressive behaviour towards Guyana, once in the form of violation of its territorial waters, has acquired a distinctive dimension in recent years, when Guyana became an increasingly significant exporter of crude oil.

Since Exxon confirmed large oil reserves (about 11 billion barrels) in 2015, Guyana expects rapid growth of its weak economy and a sharp increase in living standards for its small population of about 800,000 people.



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Income from oil already generates about \$1 billion for Guyana's economy, and estimates show that it will increase 7 times by 2040. Europe has been an increasingly **large market** for high-quality oil from Guyana (about 300,000 barrels per day), particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when it diversified its sources of supply.

The aggressive behaviour of Maduro's regime has not caused sharper counter-reactions for now, at least to the extent that the actions of Caracas hint at escalation and, ultimately, the danger of armed intervention.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who maintains good relations with Venezuela and Guyana, called on both countries to resolve disputes using dialogue, even though

he sent a small additional military force to the tri-state area ahead of the referendum.

Washington, for now, has not mentioned the reintroduction of sanctions against Venezuela, which were partially eased recently, in mid-October, attempting to force Maduro to make progress in the short term in reforming the democratic conditions for holding elections.

The referendum and the open threat to the neighbour following his decision do not provide hope that Maduro's rule is on the road to democratisation. On the contrary, it has been rapidly moving towards considerable escalation, this time not only within Venezuela but with the possibility of spilling over into the neighbouring country.