



IPRIS Viewpoints

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Portugal and Venezuela: continuity in times of change?

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On the May 23rd, Venezuelan ambassador to Lisbon Lucas Rincón Romero sought to reassure the Luso-Venezuelan community that the bilateral agreements in place would be met, and that regardless of the outcome of the legislative elections in Portugal, the process of deepening trade relations between the two countries would continue in the forthcoming years.¹ In other words, ambassador Rincón Romero believes that common political and economic interests between Portugal and Venezuela will override ideological differences or personal affinities.

1 "Embaixador venezuelano em Lisboa tranquiliza comunidade portuguesa" (*Lusa*, 23 May 2011). General Lucas Rincón Romero was the highest ranking Venezuelan military officer at the time of the 2002 coup d'état attempt against President Hugo Chávez. On April 12th 2002, Army Inspector General Rincón Romero, acting on behalf of the High Military Command, reported on Chávez's resignation. However, Chávez returned to power within three days. Later on, Rincón Romero was Defense Minister for a few months in 2002, and Minister of Interior and Justice in 2003 and 2004. He became the Venezuelan ambassador to Portugal in 2006.

Like former French President Charles de Gaulle, he is asserting that states have no friends, only interests. In recent years, in particular in the last three, trade relations between both countries have increased considerably. In 2010 in particular, Venezuela was the 27th market for Portuguese exports, while Venezuela ranked in 36th place for Portuguese imports. At this stage, Venezuela still represents less than 1% of Portuguese exports, but the potential for growth seems to be far from fully explored. Indeed, Secretary of State for Trade Fernando Serrasqueiro hopes that in a few years Venezuela will be at the top ten in terms of the Portuguese exports.² Imports, on the other hand, are also increasing. More importantly, Venezuela has become an energy supplier, thus contributing to the Portuguese energy security strategy.

2 "Exportações: Portugal quer Venezuela no top 10" (*Lusa*, 19 February 2011).

Year	Portuguese Exports to Venezuela										
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Rank	49	41	59	77	75	65	59	60	46	26	27
Total %	0.07	0.10	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.13	0.39	0.44



Year	Portuguese Imports from Venezuela										
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Rank	81	27	32	66	76	88	34	87	41	38	36
Total %	0.03	0.36	0.27	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.38	0.02	0.22	0.24	0.26

Source: AICEP/INE.

Thus, regardless of the electoral outcome in Portugal, the increasing relevance of bilateral trade ties advise and compel both countries to maintain smooth relations. In other words, foreign policy guidelines do not ignore these increasingly relevant bilateral trade relations.

Not everybody is reassured by the dissuasive capacity of trade relations. Indeed, it is no accident that among the many Portuguese communities scattered throughout the world, the only one who seems concerned about the emergence and the impact of a future coalition government composed of center-right Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the right Democratic and Social Center–People’s Party (CDS-PP) on bilateral relations, is the Luso-Venezuelan.³

Moreover, it is a fact that in certain influential sectors of PSD and CDS-PP, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is viewed with undisguised suspicion, both personally and ideologically. Although there has been considerable growth in trade relations in recent years, some observers consider the results of the Portuguese bet on the Venezuelan market to be unsatisfactory.⁴

Personal and ideological distrust, however, are a luxury beyond the reach of those who exercise state functions. Thus, a future government of PSD/CDS-PP, in substance, is likely to maintain the approach taken by the previous government of the Socialist Party (PS), in part because it will continue the focus of the previous government on economic diplomacy, as well as its strategy to guarantee new energy suppliers. Under normal circumstances, the goal of deepening the relationship with Venezuela will continue with the new government, perhaps with some nuances of a political nature.

Theoretically, if a significant and sudden change in the bilateral relationship were to occur, then the decision would come from Caracas, not from Lisbon. Venezuela is a neo-patrimonial and rentier state dominated by a charismatic leader who personally determines – without much bureaucratic mediation – the main

guidelines of domestic and foreign policy.⁵ As a consequence, decisions could be less stable and more volatile.⁶ That said, unless no other variables constrain bilateral ties, it does not seem likely that these relations will be called into question by Venezuela. With or without a change of government in Portugal, the political reasons that led Chávez to invest in the bilateral ties with Portugal have not disappeared. Portugal is not an ally helping him build a multipolar world that seeks to put an end to US hegemony. In other words, Portugal does not belong to Chávez’s anti-US political alliances, along with China, Iran and Russia. Yet, in the last few years, political contacts have been frequent both at multilateral – at the UN General Assembly, at the Ibero-American summits, and at EU–Latin America and Caribbean summits – and bilateral levels. Between 2006 and 2010, state visits and stopovers included, Chávez has been in Lisbon at least four times. In turn, Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates went to Caracas in 2008 and 2010.

The friendly relations between Lisbon and Caracas have been a source of concern for Washington, and the US diplomats in Lisbon have raised the topic in several meetings with Portuguese state officials.⁷ Portugal is one of the EU states that allows Chávez to break the diplomatic ice and to relieve the pressure imposed by US attempts to isolate Caracas. From the Venezuelan standpoint, aside from trade relations, what really matters in bilateral ties is this political angle. Thus, diplomatic relations with Lisbon will continue to have political value to Chávez as long as they continue more or less on the same win-win level. To that extent, the

3 According to the Portuguese Observatory of Emigration, in 2008 the Luso-Venezuelan community had 268.500 members.

4 See, for example, the interview of António Nogueira Leite, a close economic advisor of PSD leader Pedro Passos Coelho, describing Venezuela as an ‘exotic market’. Nogueira Leite interviewed by Francisco Teixeira, “É preciso acabar com a política económica exótica de Basílio Horta” (*Diário Económico*, 24 May 2011).

5 Neopatrimonialism is a system of rule based on patrimonial and rational-bureaucratic elements. Neopatrimonialism as a distinct term is generally held to have originated with Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. See S. N. Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism* (Sage Publications, 1973). Rentier states are “those countries that receive on a regular basis substantial amounts of external economic rent”. See Hossein Mahdavy, “The Pattern and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran”, in M. A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 428.

6 Since Chávez became President, there has been a sudden shift in Venezuela’s foreign policy, which became “militantly anti-American and attempted to organize the hemisphere into an anti-American, pro-Russian, pro-Iranian bloc. (...) Did Venezuela’s national interests suddenly change? No. Chávez simply redefined those interests”. See Robert Kagan, “Idealism Isn’t Dead” (*Newsweek*, 30 December 2009).

7 See “Cable sobre las relaciones entre Portugal y Venezuela” (*El País/WikiLeaks: US embassy in Lisbon*, October 2008).



lower personal and ideological affinity of Chávez with a future government composed by PSD and CDS-PP is not insurmountable.⁸

Brazilian Foreign Minister Antônio Patriota, shortly after taking office in January 2011, said that he identified himself with the guidelines of his predecessor Celso Amorim, but was careful to stress that continuity did not mean repetition.⁹ It is likely that the successor of Portuguese Foreign Minister Luís Amado will make these words his own. Venezuela will be no exception.

⁸ A word of caution: the lowest point in bilateral ties during the last decade was between 2002 and 2005. This period corresponded to the coalition governments of PSD and CDS-PP. Part of the explanation lies in the US invasion of Iraq and the Portuguese political support for Washington. The warmer relations between Lisbon and Washington at that time led to colder relations between Lisbon and Caracas.

⁹ Antônio Patriota interviewed by Paulo Celso Pereira, "Continuar não é repetir" (*Veja*, 9 January 2011).

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