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ACLED Methodology for Coding Armed Groups in Venezuela

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Background

Venezuela has experienced political crisis and disorder since the late 2000s. In 1999, Hugo Chávez assumed Venezuela's presidency and remained in power until his death in March 2013. During the first years of the Chávez administration, Venezuela saw the advancement of social programs that increased citizens' access to food, housing, healthcare, and education, and the reduction of poverty and improved literacy (CEPR, February 2009). Nevertheless, several factors, including the mismanagement of resources, lack of investment in infrastructure, and inflation, derailed economic growth and plunged the country into a severe economic crisis in 2014 (Bloomberg, 7 March 2013; BBC, 12 August 2021).

In a bid to build up grassroots support, Chavez established community organizations called "Bolivarian Circles" in 2001 (Combating Terrorism Center, August 2019). These groups reportedly received funding and arms directly from the government to attack dissident protesters, and later evolved into the pro-government militias known as *colectivos* today (Arenas, 2022). While some *colectivos* are still unarmed and focus on their original role of community improvement and organizing cultural activities, many have turned to criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, and illegal gambling. In some places, such as the 23 de Enero neighborhood in Caracas, *colectivos* function as a kind of "microstate" and may even have a say on when police forces are allowed entry (Transparencia Venezuela, June 2020).

In 2007, Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement party merged with other leftist parties to form the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, becoming the ruling party under the government of Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro. Under Maduro's government, the economic and social situation of the country continued to decline as food and power shortages and hyperinflation persisted, with over 94% of the population reportedly living in poverty in 2021 (Caracas Chronicles, 30 September 2021). The ongoing political crisis escalated in January 2019 when opposition leader Juan Guaidó assumed the National Assembly presidency and the powers of the executive branch (Euronews, 28 January 2019), following a contentious presidential election in May 2018 (BBC, 12 August 2021). The election was deemed unfair because Maduro's government controlled the courts, constituent assembly, state media, and the National Electoral Council. While Guaidó was initially recognized as Venezuela's leader by over 50 countries (BBC, 12 August 2021), he held little power in practice. A significant number of countries subsequently withdrew their recognition of Guaidó after he lost the 2020 parliamentary elections (Reuters, 25 January 2021).

Organized criminal actors in Venezuela

Amid Venezuela's economic and political instability, organized crime by various types of criminal groups has proliferated. In particular, *megabandas* (mega-gangs), heavily armed, highly organized gangs with at least 50 members, have increasingly been involved in drug trafficking, extortion, kidnappings, and contract killings. The proliferation of *megabandas* has been attributed to the backfiring of the Maduro government's 2013 'Peace Zone' initiative, under which the government agreed to suspend police operations in designated neighborhoods, called 'Peace Zones', on the condition that gangs stop their criminal activities and help maintain peace (Efecto Cocuyo, 16 May

2015; InSight Crime, 25 January 2022). Experts believe that instead of reducing criminality, the lack of policing in the 'Peace Zones' created the conditions for gangs to flourish and to act with impunity (Transparency Venezuela, June 2020).

Megabandas, like the Tren de Aragua gang in north-central Venezuela, are controlled by gang leaders detained in prison, or '*pranes,*' who were instrumental in creating these groups (InSightCrime, 20 May 2018). Some of these *megabandas* have control over large portions of a territory and may operate in one or more states (Transparencia Venezuela, 10 February 2016). The El Coquí gang, for example, controls the shantytown of Cota 905 and its communities of El Cementerio and La Vega in Caracas, an area where more than 300,000 people live (BBC, 12 July 2021). Investigations over the years have revealed that some high-ranking politicians have close links with '*pranes*' and *megabandas*, and have facilitated their criminal activities (InSightCrime, 20 May 2018).

Meanwhile, organized criminal groups known as *sindicatos* – unions or syndicates in Spanish, although unrelated to labor rights - have increasingly asserted control over resource-rich regions, particularly the Orinoco Mining Arc in Bolívar state (InSightCrime, 17 November 2021). Bolstered by alliances with corrupt state officials (Amazônia Socioambiental, December 2019; El Carabobeño, 13 March 2017), *sindicatos* "determine who enters and leaves the area, impose rules, [and] inflict harsh punishment on those who break them" while profiting from mining activities and protection rackets (OHCHR, 15 July 2020). These criminal groups have also faced increasing competition from other violent groups, such as the Colombian rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), which have gained control of some territory previously controlled by *sindicatos* (InSight Crime, 17 November 2021).

Colombian rebel groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), for which the Venezuelan government has openly expressed support (Reuters, 29 July 2019), and the ELN are also active in Venezuela. These groups operate and have bases in states along Venezuela's western border, including in Amazonas, Apure, Bolívar, Táchira, and Zulia states. Rebel groups also have *de facto* control of some cities near the border where reports indicate they provide basic services to locals, mediate land disputes, and even punish thieves (New York Times, 26 April 2021). Criminal activity, including drug trafficking and illegal mining, is a key channel through which they fund their operations.

Impact on methodology and coding decisions

When ACLED launched its coverage of Venezuela,[1] the country was not categorized by ACLED as one in which organized criminal violence should be included in its coverage of political violence. At the time, Venezuela met only three of the eight indicators[2] used by ACLED to determine if gang activity fundamentally impacts the state's primacy in public safety and security: known links between politicians and gangs, high rates of homicide, and the existence of specialized anti-gang units in state security forces. However, more recent statistics and insights show that criminality in the

[1] See this press release.
[2] See ACLED's methodology on Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks & Coding Rules.

country has increased in recent years alongside the deteriorating political and socio-economic situation. In turn, these factors led to the proliferation of organized criminal groups and also encouraged existing groups like the *megabandas* to further entrench their control in local communities. Some experts note that gangs also used the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to solidify their role as a replacement of the state by carrying out state functions, such as implementing security measures such as curfews and providing basic supplies and services in their areas of control (Venezuela Analysis, 19 August 2021). Following deliberations within the ACLED team as well as with external experts, ACLED reevaluated Venezuela's inclusion in ACLED's list of countries where gang violence qualifies as political violence.[3]

This reevaluation found that as of 2022, Venezuela met two additional indicators to qualify for inclusion. First, the share of overall violence that is gang violence,[4] which increased from 4% during the initial evaluation in 2018 to over 25% in 2022,[5] indicating that organized gangs now play a major role in the violence landscape. Second, the spatial dispersion of violence,[6] which changed from geographically dispersed in 2018 to clustered in large cities by 2022, indicates that organized gangs have started to exercise a form of *de facto* control over parts of urban areas.

The increase in the proportion and concentration of gang violence in the country coincided with the coronavirus pandemic and a further deterioration of the economic situation in the country. This created conditions that led to an increase in urban criminality and allowed existing powerful gangs – especially *megabandas* – to expand their control in their strongholds (Venezuela Analysis, 19 August 2021; DW, 7 January 2021). The establishment of the specialized anti-gang Special Action Forces 'FAES' and the heavy-handed state responses to crack down on the gangs further indicate that the state is struggling to contain the gangs and exercise state control over *de facto* gang-controlled territory (Reuters, 18 July 2021).

Due to these developments, Venezuela now meets the threshold for inclusion in ACLED's list of countries where gang violence has significant political consequences and is thus considered political violence. Following the results of this reassessment, per standard procedures, the ACLED team carried out a supplemental coding project to ensure that relevant gang activity was included in the dataset back to 2019, the start date of ACLED coverage for the country. These historical data were published in December 2022.

How are key actors recorded?

State actors

The **Government of Venezuela (1999-)** actor is the general government actor coded in Venezuela. For state forces, the standard military and police actors are coded, **Military Forces of Venezuela**

[3] It is part of standard ACLED practice to carry out reevaluations like this as part of efforts to maintain an accurate and up-to-date dataset.
[4] For more on this indicator, see Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks & Coding Rules.
[5] Data as of October 2022.
[6] For more on this indicator, see Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks & Coding Rules.

(1999-) and **Police Forces of Venezuela (1999-)**, respectively. ACLED also codes some state forces sub-actors where relevant. For example, **Military Forces of Venezuela (1999-) GNB: Venezuelan National Guard** and **Police Forces of Venezuela (1999-) FAES: Special Action Forces**.

Colombian rebel groups

Several notable rebel groups from Colombia are active in Venezuelan territory, including the **EPL: Popular Liberation Army, ELN: National Liberation Army**, and **FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia dissident groups**.[7] Unspecified FARC dissident groups are coded using the catch-all **FARC Dissident: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction** primary actor, while specific dissident groups are noted by slight variations in the actor name: e.g. **FARC Dissident - 1st Front: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction (1st Front - Armando Rios)**. Both the ELN and FARC dissident groups are coded with an 'Interaction' code of 2.

With the demobilization of FARC forces after the Colombian peace agreement in 2016, the ELN gained control of previously FARC-held territory in Apure and Táchira states, further expanding towards Zulia and the south of the country in Bolívar. Along the border with Colombia, the ELN is mainly involved in controlling drug trafficking and smuggling routes to transport drugs produced in Colombia, while in Bolívar state, the group's main activity is the exploitation of illegal gold mining areas (InSightCrime, 28 January 2020).

In 2019, links between the Second Marquetalia Dissident Front of the FARC and the ELN were reported (El Tiempo, 29 August 2019). Since then, the alliance has fought against the 1st, 7th, 10th, 28th, and 33rd FARC Dissident Fronts present in the area, who act under the loose overall command of Miguel Boatche Santanilla (alias: Gentil Duarte) in the border area over the control of lucrative drug trafficking routes (*El Nacional*, 14 February 2022).

Gangs and *colectivos*

The most prominent organized crime actors in Venezuela are the *megabandas* discussed above. When *megabandas* like Tren de Aragua and El Coquí are named in source reports, ACLED codes the named actor. *Megabandas* are coded with an 'Interaction' code of 3.

Smaller gangs also have a significant impact on Venezuela's security landscape. They have fewer members and not as much influence or political power to corrupt high-ranking officials as the heavily armed mega-gangs or the Colombian rebel groups. However, they still manage to partner with low-ranking corrupt military and police officers, engage with local politicians, and control smaller portions of a rural sector, the outskirts of a municipality, or of a parish. Some of their main

[7] A number of FARC sub-commanders refused to demobilize following the 2016 peace deal in which the national organization was officially dissolved and transitioned into a political party (represented in the data as **FARC: Common Alternative Revolutionary Force**). Prior to the demobilization, FARC's organizational breakdown consisted of seven 'blocs,' each containing five or more 'fronts' with around 200 fighters in each; these 'fronts' form the basis of many dissident groups today who retain their organizational identity and territory of operation (CISAC, July 2019).

criminal activities are kidnappings, robberies such as cattle theft in rural areas, and extortion, which may sometimes even supplant drug trafficking as a source of income. These smaller gangs also often clash with state forces or other gangs over territorial disputes (InSightCrime, 7 September 2021). Sources often refer to these smaller organized crime groups as *bandas delictivas*, *bandas criminales*, *bandas hamponiles*, *pandillas*, or *delincuentes*. As with *megabandas*, smaller gangs are coded by name, with an 'Interaction' code of 3. ACLED has recorded hundreds of smaller gangs operating across Venezuela. As a result of the collective activities of these smaller groups, large portions of the territory are affected by frequent violence.

Colectivos are pro-government militia groups that are also involved in criminal activities. These groups became more popularly known as '*colectivos*' after the 2002 coup attempt, though the term had been around since the guerilla groups of the 1960s. In 2006, when they were integrated into the government's 'communal councils,' *colectivos* gained access to state funding and resources, including arms (InSight Crime, 18 May 2018). Armed *colectivos* have since functioned as the main governmental weapon against dissent, and their masked, motorcycle-riding members have been known to target protesters at anti-government demonstrations. Increasingly, however, these groups have turned to criminal means, such as drug trafficking, extortion, and illegal gambling — not dissimilar to those of gangs — to fund their activities and maintain control over territory. *Colectivos* are coded by name when sources provide them, though sources often simply mention that a *'colectivo'* was involved in an event without naming the specific *colectivo*. In such cases, the general **Colectivos** actor is coded with an 'Interaction' code of 3.

Unidentified Armed Actors

In many cases, sources do not name the groups involved in an event or distinguish between whether a gang or a *colectivo* was involved. Rather, they refer to these groups collectively using terms such as *bandas criminales* (criminal groups) or *bandas delictivas* (gangs). *Colectivos* and gangs often employ similar tactics and are often involved in similar activities, such as kidnappings, extortion, and hired killings (*sicariato*). This makes it difficult to draw a distinction between events that are carried out by unnamed gangs and those that are carried out by unnamed *colectivos*. Therefore, unlike in the coding of other countries like Brazil and Mexico, the Unidentified Gang (Country) actor is *not* coded in Venezuela. Instead, the dual actor **Unidentified Gang and/or Colectivo** with an 'Interaction code' of 3, is coded in cases where a) there is explicit mention of a gang or criminal act (e.g. drug trafficking), b) certain TTPs (tactics, techniques, or procedures) such as the presence of narco-messages, the mutilation of bodies, public hangings or mass shootings, or drive-by shootings, are involved, or c) the victims' identities are politically significant (e.g. politicians, government employees, journalists, public prosecutors, judges, off-duty law enforcement officers).

In other instances of unassigned violence, the actor **Unidentified Armed Group (Venezuela)** is coded when an event involves a) an armed group (multiple persons), and/or b) there are signs of armed groups' potential involvement (e.g. bodies wrapped in plastic or blankets, three of more bodies found in informal burial grounds or execution points, violence related to human trafficking), c) other overtly politically significant actors are targeted (e.g. human rights defenders, members of vulnerable groups).

The inclusion of criminal violence by gangs as political violence by ACLED does not extend to crimes perpetrated by unorganized groups and unaffiliated individuals. Because unorganized petty crime is widespread in Venezuela, ACLED treats violent robberies by unidentified perpetrators conservatively and does not assume they are perpetrated by gangs or are committed with a political motive in mind, regardless of the target's identity. As such, violent robberies by unidentified perpetrators are not included in ACLED's Venezuela data, in line with how criminal violence is treated across the ACLED dataset.

How are events sourced for Venezuela?

Each week, ACLED researchers review about 20 Spanish-language sources to code events across Venezuela; a further 14 sources are reviewed on a bi-weekly to monthly basis because they produce reports on a more ad hoc basis.

The state suppression of independent media poses a challenge to sourcing events in Venezuela. Such suppression has steadily increased since the 2016 political and economic crisis alongside detentions, harassment, and attacks on journalists by police and pro-government forces for covering public dissent (Committee to Protect Journalists, 12 April 2017). As a result, event reports often lack details, such as the names of specific armed groups involved. The harassment and censorship continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to many digital news platforms and newspapers has decreased due to government efforts to regulate information about the pandemic (International Press Institute, 2020). Moreover, the media is polarized between those that are supportive of the government and those that are not, or are less supportive of the regime (Media Landscapes, 2020). Pro-government media, while less susceptible to censorship or other restrictions, tends to underreport relevant events, especially opposition-led demonstration events.

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Venezuela ranks 159 out of 180 countries and territories on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Since 2017, the Maduro government has maintained its grip on the media, and RSF has registered an increase in the number of press members arrested by intelligence forces. The Venezuelan National Telecommunications Commission often removes radio and TV stations from their broadcast frequencies if they openly criticize the government, and has also coordinated internet cuts that affect common citizens (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). As a result, news outlets go offline for extended periods of time with limited advance notice. Lack of funding due to the decade-long economic crisis, coupled with state repression, has also impacted the capacity of media outlets to provide regular coverage of events as well as their capacity to set up and maintain archives that would allow for the coding of historical data.

The vast majority of ACLED events in Venezuela are sourced from national news sources, the most prolific of which are El Pitazo, El Nacional, La Patilla, and Caraota Digital. National sources feature heavily in ACLED data because they have more resources than subnational sources. This allows them to maintain their reporting throughout the ongoing socio-economic crisis and in the face of widespread media censorship and the harassment of journalists (International Press Institute, 12 October 2020; Espacio Publico, 21 November 2021). Moreover, most of these sources are readily

accessible online. El Nacional is one of the oldest news outlets in Venezuela that reports and publishes through digital platforms. It has not had a print version since 2018 (El Nacional, 13 December 2018). Meanwhile, other online sources such as El Pitazo, La Patilla, and Caraota Digital were created to serve as alternative sources of information to circumvent the progressive censorship in Venezuela (La Patilla, 12 June 2018; Medianalisis, 10 October 2018; Voz de America, 2 February 2022).

Subnational sources have been more severely impacted by the socio-economic crisis in Venezuela and, therefore, have much less reach and resources than national sources. Nonetheless, they are useful for supplementing gaps as they provide coverage of more localized events. The subnational sources most frequently used by ACLED to code events are El Carabobeño, Diario Primicia, Diario El Tiempo, and El Impulso. Most of these sources are privately owned and are not pro-government.

The coverage of demonstration events is also challenging as most media outlets do not regularly cover such events. Over 80% of demonstration events recorded by ACLED in Venezuela are sourced from national sources. While some local monitoring organizations do report on demonstrations in Venezuela, these reports generally only include aggregated numbers rather than disaggregated information about events, and as such lack the necessary criteria (a specific date and location) to be incorporated into the ACLED dataset (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, 15 February 2022). The ACLED team strives to triangulate information about demonstrations from other sources in such cases, but due to the limitations of and restrictions on the media landscape described above, disaggregated information about demonstration events remains difficult to come by. To address this, ACLED pursues partnerships with local organizations and monitors independent and reliable 'new media' sources that provide more granular information on demonstration events. Still, the number of demonstration events in Venezuela reported by ACLED is likely undercounted and, therefore, should be considered a conservative estimate.

In order to fill in gaps in information about violent activity by armed groups in Venezuela, ACLED has partnered with Monitor de Víctimas,[8] a non-government organization that gathers, triangulates, systematizes, and analyzes information on homicides in Caracas and Bolívar state. Monitor de Víctimas relies on primary source material gathered by a team of journalists who visit morgues on a daily basis and interview police, forensic experts, and relatives of the victims. With the support of community leaders affiliated with Caracas Mi Convive, an organization working on violence reduction and prevention in Libertador municipality, Monitor de Víctimas carries out additional on-site investigations to triangulate the information. Data provided by Monitor de Víctimas is used to code almost 10% of events in Venezuela, about two-thirds of which are 'Violence against civilians' events and one-third are 'Battles' events.

Beyond Monitor de Victimas, ACLED is partnered with FundaREDES,[9] a non-government organization that promotes human rights through various programs, including a human rights observatory as well as activist and citizen participation support groups. As part of its human rights

[8] This partnership began in October 2019.
[9] This partnership began in June 2022.

observatory, FundaREDES publishes quarterly reports, presenting disaggregated data on homicides, forced disappearances, and armed clashes between state forces and armed groups in the bordering states of Amazonas, Apure, Bolívar, Falcón, Táchira, and Zulia. Moreover, in their monthly *Informe de contexto fronterizado* report, FundaREDES provides additional information on armed groups' presence and activities, law enforcement operations, and developments impacting civilians' security and human rights in these states. These data are collected using local news sources, by a network of human rights defenders trained by the organization, and journalists. The data are publicly available on their website. FundaREDES' geographical focus bolsters ACLED coverage of Venezuela's political violence patterns in states where reporting may be limited and challenging. Data provided by FundaREDES represent over 10% of events in Venezuela, about half of which are 'Violence against civilians' events and another half are 'Battles' events. The information FundaREDES collects allows ACLED to further improve the tracking of armed groups' activities, as well as significant state forces operations.