

Op-Ed on Venezuela and Cuba Slips Past NYT Factcheckers

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[Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting](#)

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A February 15, 2015, [op-ed](#) on Venezuela by Enrique Krauze seems to have slipped by the New York Times' factcheckers.

Krauze's thesis (a tired one, but very popular with Venezuelan and Cuban right-wingers in South Florida) is that Venezuela has not only followed "the Cuban model," but has recently outdone Cuba in moving Venezuela further along a socialist path even as Cuba enacts economic reforms. This idea is not merely an oversimplification—as it might appear to the casual observer of Latin American politics—but is largely misleading. To bolster his case, Krauze—a prominent Mexican writer and publisher—includes numerous false statements and errors, which should have been caught by the Times' factcheckers.

Krauze begins by claiming that the Venezuelan government, first under President Hugo Chávez and then his successor Nicolás Maduro, has taken control over the media. Chávez "accumulated control over the organs of government and over much of the information media: radio, television and the press," we are told, and then Maduro "took over the rest of Venezuelan television."

A simple factcheck shows this to be false. The majority of media outlets in Venezuela—including television—continue to be privately owned; further, the private TV audience dwarfs the number of viewers watching state TV. A [2010 study](#) of Venezuelan television found that

as of September 2010, Venezuelan state TV channels had just a 5.4 percent audience share. Of the other 94.6 percent of the audience, 61.4 percent were watching privately owned television channels, and 33.1 percent were watching paid TV.

A 2013 [Carter Center report](#) found that Venezuela's private TV outlets had about 74 percent of the audience share for coverage of "recent key newsworthy events."

The media landscape has changed little since. National opposition station Globovisión was sold in 2013, but to a private party; it was not "taken over" by the government. And opposition voices continue to appear on national TV outlets—even the ones that are often described as "pro-government"—free to make the harshest criticisms of the government and to encourage people to protest, as several prominent opposition figures did last year during the violent street blockades and demonstrations aimed at forcing Maduro to step down.

Globovisión, for example, aired interviews—following its change in ownership—with opposition

leader [María Corina Machado](#) and [Juan Guaidó](#) of Leopoldo López's Voluntad Popular party; during her interview, Machado argued that people have the right to overthrow the democratically elected government. And many other Venezuelan networks also frequently broadcast opposition voices.

In fact, the New York Times [issued a correction](#) last year after reporting that Globovisión was "the only television station that regularly broadcast voices critical of the government." It's a shame that the same standards for accuracy in the Times' news section apparently do not apply to the opinion page.

Krauze then says that Maduro "confronted" those "protesting students with arrests and gunfire," and that "many were killed" as, supposedly, Maduro "suppressed demonstrations by the opposition." A quick review of events last year—as [covered by the New York Times](#), among others—reveals a wholly different story.

First, most of those killed were either pro-government or were bystanders. Many of those killed (at least 11, [according to David Smilde](#) of the Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights blog, who in turn cites the opposition paper El Universal) were National Guard officers, police or pro-government counter-protesters. A number of bystanders and motorists ([at least 10](#)) were also killed as a result of the protesters' violent tactics, which included stringing barbed wire across the streets in order to [decapitate Chavista motorcyclists](#). (Two died this way.) Demonstrators fired on Guard and police officers, killing at least seven.

It is true that some security forces fired on demonstrators, killing at least three. Yet as over a dozen members of Congress noted in [a letter](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry, the Maduro government arrested some 20 security state agents in connection with these incidents. This was not a case of government-ordered crackdown on protests; if it were, the opposition's street blockades might have been cleared in days—instead, they remained for weeks—and motorists and cyclists might have been saved from decapitation, crashing into barricades, or getting shot when they got out of their stopped cars.

Having attempted to present the Venezuelan government as some sort of dictatorial regime where freedom of press and assembly are crushed, Krauze goes on to present a series of flawed statements about Venezuela's economic relationship with Cuba.

First, Krauze writes that "Venezuela absorbs 45 percent of Cuba's trade deficit." Official data on Venezuela/Cuba trade is opaque, so it is unclear where Krauze is getting his figure. In terms of its overall trade, Cuba does not have a trade deficit, but a small trade surplus (\$697 million USD, [according to the WTO](#)). So this statement is false.

Krauze states, "Chávez-era economic agreements with Cuba were all highly favorable to the island nation." But that the agreements are favorable to Cuba does not preclude them from being favorable to Venezuela as well. They are complementary exchanges: Venezuela has a surfeit of oil yet lacks human capital in some sectors. It could be the case that what Venezuela receives is of a lesser value than what it sends, but unfortunately there is a paucity of information to prove this either way.

What is certain is that the services exported to Venezuela extend far beyond the services of 40,000 Cuban medical professionals. Venezuela sends hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans to Cuba for various operations (including Operación Milagro, which extends eye treatments to people in numerous Latin American countries at the joint cost of Venezuela

and Cuba). Thousands of Venezuelans have been given scholarships, particularly for the study of medicine. Cuba also exports substantial quantities of pharmaceuticals to Venezuela. It also sends educators and other professionals.

In further arguing that Venezuela is somehow putting Cuba's interests before its own, Krauze claims, "The expenses for the Missions...involved Venezuelan payments of about \$5.5 billion annually, of which the Cuban regime retained 95 percent, the rest going toward paying the doctors." But this ignores that Cuba provides other services to Venezuela. It also ignores the difficulties in comparing salaries with Cuba, given the vast subsidies for goods that exist in the Cuban economy. The salaries for medics on these foreign postings are vastly larger than normal public sector salaries in Cuba.

Krauze also writes that "thousands" of Cuban doctors that Venezuela is paying for "have defected to other countries in recent years." Despite US government efforts to actively encourage such defections, which the New York Times [has condemned](#), the overall defection rate of Cuban medics on overseas missions is [less than 2 percent](#) (as of 2011, using US figures on the number of defectors and Cuban figures for the number of medics on overseas missions). The amount of defections in Venezuela from 2006-11 was 824, which works out to a rate of about 1.1 percent—slightly less than the overall rate.

Krauze claims: "Oil was supplied at such low prices that Cuba could turn around and refine and export some of it at a profit." This makes something normal sound very conspiratorial—those two-faced Cubans, getting oil on the cheap from Venezuela then selling it out the back door! Actually, Venezuela has invested heavily in Cuba's downstream capabilities—renovating a moribund Soviet-era refinery in Cienfuegos, Cuba.

Venezuela's state-owned oil company, [PDVSA, owns a 49 percent stake](#) in the refinery and therefore shares in its proceeds. The aim of the investment project was to create a refinery that could help satisfy Cuba's domestic requirements but also turn Cuba into a [hub for exports](#) of refined products to the Caribbean. Thus it guarantees purchases of Venezuelan oil and allows Venezuela to better access Caribbean markets (i.e. it has a similar justification to Venezuela's ownership and investments in several US refineries).

Krauze writes, "Mr. Maduro's government insists that the crisis is an 'economic war' conducted by the right and refuses to alter the nation's currency controls." Krauze may have missed the news last week, but the Times' fact-checkers shouldn't have: As [reported by the Times](#), the Venezuelan government announced "an easing of the tightly controlled exchange rates that critics say have fed the nation's economic crisis."

Maduro's claim of "economic war"? While there's little doubt that most of Venezuela's economic woes stem from its problematic exchange rate regime, the government's recent [documented busts](#) of massive hoarding of essential items by private companies should not be dismissed out of hand, either.

Perhaps Krauze wouldn't have felt he needed to stretch the truth so far—and present so many inaccurate claims—if his thesis weren't so flawed. Chávez and Maduro have never claimed that they wanted to bring the Cuban model to Venezuela; this is a fantasy of the Venezuelan right. To the contrary, after announcing his plan for "Socialism for the 21st Century," [Chávez said](#), "Some are saying that we want to copy the Cuban model. No.... It would be a very serious mistake for Venezuela to copy a model like the Cuban, or any other."

For his part, Raúl Castro has also expressed support for Latin American countries pursuing their own respective economic and political choices: “Each [leader] is learning their own identity and finding their own identity within the continent. We aren’t the godfathers and they aren’t the heirs,” [he told Oliver Stone](#) in the 2010 documentary *South of the Border*.

The fact is, whether Krauze wants to admit it or not, Venezuela is a democracy, and the Maduro government was democratically elected—as were the Chavista municipal officials who won a majority of elections half a year after Maduro was elected, in a [stunning defeat](#) for the opposition. Krauze doesn’t have to like the current Venezuelan government, but he shouldn’t confuse it with an unelected one, as in Cuba.

Nor should he be so easily confused by the Venezuelan economic system—where the [private sector enjoyed](#) strong growth in the years after Chávez took office—versus the Cuban model of socialism. More worrying is that the New York Times opinion page would be so baffled by these important differences.

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