



OUR TO-AND-FRO RELATIONSHIP WITH VENEZUELA

The Universidad del Rosario's Venezuela Observatory has become an indispensable source of information for understanding the complex dynamics of Venezuela and its bilateral relations with Colombia.

Just as there is talk today in the United States about building a huge wall to separate the long border between that country and Mexico, we in South America also have an immense border that separates two countries, and it, too, has a history full of push and pull.

Paraphrasing Eduardo Galeano in his book "Open Veins of Latin America", the Colombia-Venezuela border is much more than a winding, 2,219km-long line of mountains, river, and the sands of the Guajira Peninsula. Those desert sands are the home to the Wayuu people, a nation locked between nations whose borders have been crossed back and forth for centuries by the Wayuu, who do not see 'sides', just a vast sacred territory for trading basic goods.

But the permeability of the border transcends these natural crossings by the Wayuu, and is a reminder of a rich history of cultural, political, and economic exchange between Colombia and Venezuela. The history of the region cannot be written without noting the multiple connections between the two countries, including participation in the Army of Liberation at the time of independence, the

migration of the 1980s that saw thousands of Colombian professionals take skilled positions in the Venezuelan jobs market, or historical clashes as the border was eventually defined as we know it today. Throughout history, this has been Colombia's most dynamic boundary, and Venezuela's only truly active border, where hundreds of thousands of citizens have crossed in both directions.

Now, the Venezuela Observatory at the Universidad del Rosario has been organizing academic events and publications to spark interest in this binational relationship. This has encouraged the training of young researchers, who have stayed on to work on topics related to Venezuela for their masters and Ph.Ds., bolstering a community of experts on different topics related to Venezuela and the bilateral relationship. Thanks to its publications and participation in different public and academic spaces, the Observatory has built a reputation as a reliable, opinion-forming source of information for the public.

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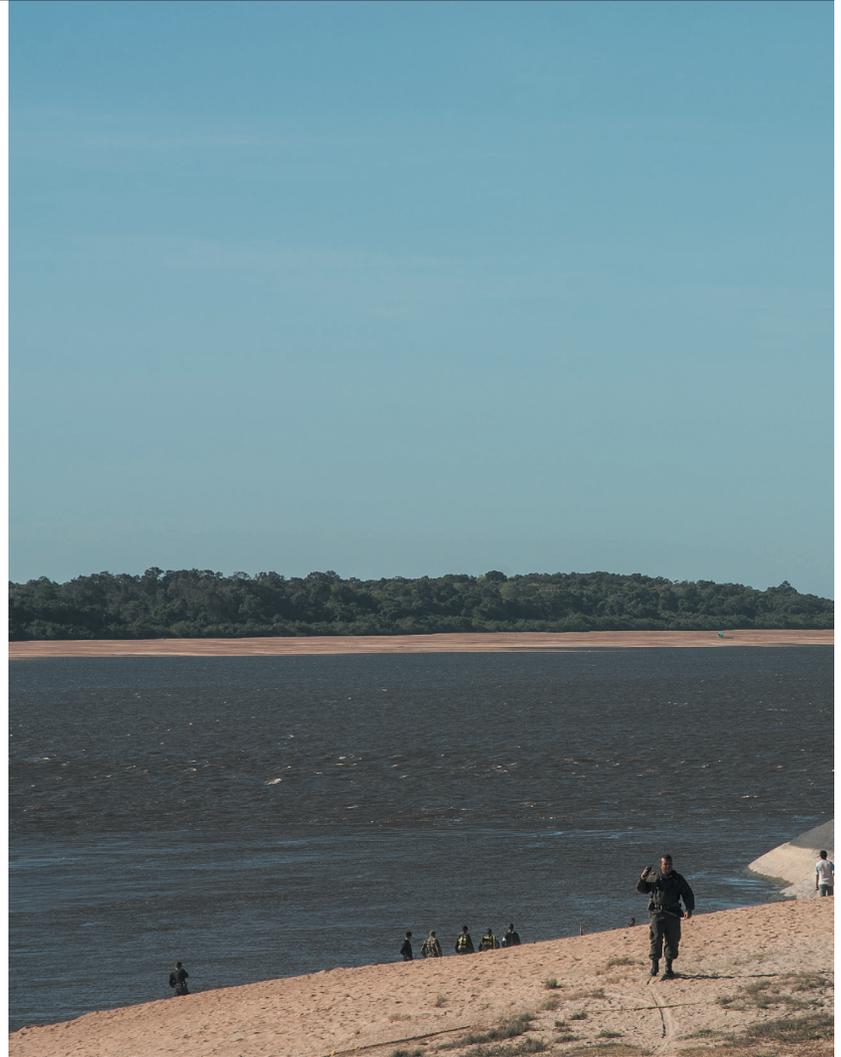
← In the Latin American academic context, the Observatory based at the Universidad del Rosario has become a clear point of reference as the only group dedicated specifically to the study of Venezuela. Since its founding, it has maintained a balanced and objective position on Venezuelan issues, without becoming a mouthpiece for any political tendency on the pros and cons of issues.

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At a time when Colombians seemed interested only in looking towards cultural and economic lights such as Mexico or the United States, the work of the Observatory brought a better understanding of the complex political, economic, social, and international realities of Venezuela. Just a few years back, the neighbouring country was a relative unknown to us, bar the odd anecdote. It must be remembered that when Venezuela saw Chavismo ascend to power at the end of the 20th century, Colombia knew very little of what lay the other side of the border town of Cúcuta.

The individual and collective work of the members of the Observatory has benefited from the cooperation of participants in Colombian and Venezuelan academic networks, with researchers from both sides of the frontier. They produce studies on political trends in Venezuela that are suited to both general readers and specialists, covering political developments in Venezuela of great relevance for Colombians.

The Observatory was founded in 2004 under the direction of Francesca Ramos, professor in the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations at the Universidad del Rosario. Professor Ramos has



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long dedicated her research to the political and international dynamics that affect Venezuela, and its neighbourhood relations with Colombia.

Ramos says that the importance of the Observatory is that the team there “has consistently produced books and articles to disseminate knowledge and the results of their research in the context of a macro-project called Evolving Political Paradigms in Venezuela. This study has looked at political changes and their implications in the country from 1998 to the present.

KEY FINDINGS

But the work of Ramos and her team is not limited to ivory-tower commentaries. It is a genuine and grounded research paradigm whose findings have found their way into public debate in both countries.



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Some of their research has analyzed the frontier area and examined the characteristics that were making it a potential headache for the governments of both countries. In 2011, for example, they described and analyzed the phenomena that set the countries against each other based on economic imbalances existing in the area. These generated economic distortions that illegal groups were able to exploit for their own purposes. Observatory studies shed light on other matters that the two governments seemed to be unaware of, for example that the illicit trade in gasoline was more profitable than coca smuggling (Ramos and Rodríguez, 2012).

Similarly, thanks to its sharp observance of Venezuela's political activities, Observatory

SOME KEY CONTRIBUTIONS TO CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH IN COLOMBIA:

- The book *Hugo Chavez: A Decade in Power* (*Hugo Chávez: una década en el poder*) brings together the contributions of a select group of Venezuelan and Colombian researchers to produce the most comprehensive evaluation of the first 10 years of Chavismo, edited by Ramos, Romero and Ramírez, 2010.
- As a continuation of its ongoing analysis and following the same research paradigm, the Observatory has just published the book *From Chávez to Maduro: Balance and Perspectives* (*De Chávez a Maduro: Balance y perspectivas*, edited by Ramos, De Liso and Rodríguez, 2016).
- *Neighborhood without Limits* (*Vecindad sin límites*, edited by Ramos and Otálvaro, 2008), is one of the few Colombian books that has discussed the possibility of establishing a Border Integration Zone in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander and the Venezuelan state of Táchira, a political project that was aborted under the Chavista government, but will be reinstated in the future when the necessary cooperation exists between the two countries.
- Carlos Lleras Restrepo and Rómulo Betancourt: *Transformative Democratizers* (*Carlos Lleras Restrepo y Rómulo Betancourt: Dos transformadores democráticos*) is a book that evaluates the leadership of two significant figures in the democratic life of Colombia and Venezuela in the Latin America of the 1960s and 70s, when the region was plagued by dictatorships. It recognizes the historical importance of the two statesmen, each of whom emerged from difficult political circumstances: partisan violence in Colombia and military domination in Venezuela.
- "This Is not a Border, it's a River" (*Esto no es una frontera, esto es un río*) is the Observatory's radio program, used to disseminate knowledge among the general public. It goes beyond formal academic research and strengthens the role of the Universidad del Rosario in reaching other social sectors and exercising social responsibility.

researcher Ronal Rodríguez discovered the controversial Decree 1787 buried deep in the Venezuelan government's official state bulletin. The decree set maritime boundary coordinates for a zone where legislation had already been in place since the two countries separated in 1831. The discovery was widely publicized in the media.

But what is undoubtedly most interesting is that there may be more discoveries to come. The Venezuela Observatory is the first team of Colombian researchers to have access to the Colombia archive at the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry. The Observatory is currently going through this copious material for the writing of a binational history that will transcend official histories that carefully steered clear of the real tensions of this historical relationship. ■