

# SCALING AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE:

**RUSSIA, CUBA, AND THE DYNAMICS OF  
AUTOCRATIC COOPERATION IN LATIN AMERICA**

January, 2026



## Armando Chaguaceda

Principal Researcher at Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C. Karl Loewenstein Fellow and Visiting Professor of Political Science at Amherst College. Holds a Bachelor's degree in History and a Master's degree in Political Science (University of Havana), as well as a Ph.D. in History and Regional Studies (Universidad Veracruzana). Specializes in the study of autocratization processes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as in post-Soviet Russia and its geopolitical ties with Latin America. Country Expert for the V-Dem project (University of Gothenburg). His publications include: Chaguaceda, Armando, *La otra hegemonía. Autoritarismo y resistencias en Nicaragua y Venezuela*, Hypermedia Editorial, Columbia, USA, 2020.



## César Santos

Bachelor in Philosophy and Master in Social Sciences from the Universidad Veracruzana (Mexico). Researcher at GAPAC, specializing in China's authoritarian influence in Latin America, electoral violence, populism, and liberal political thought. Author of *Viejas Ideas. ¿Nuevos Desafíos?* Un estudio teórico sobre el ascenso del iliberalismo (Traveler, 2023), and of articles published in *The Diplomat*, *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, and *Diálogo Político*, among others. Member of the Cuba Section of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) and Associate Researcher at Expediente Abierto.





# **SCALING AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE:**

**RUSSIA, CUBA, AND THE DYNAMICS OF  
AUTOCRATIC COOPERATION IN LATIN AMERICA**

**JANUARY, 2026**



Scaling Authoritarian Influence. Russia, Cuba and the dynamics of autocratic cooperation in Latin America.

© 2026, Armando Chaguaceda and Cesar Eduardo Santos.

Digital ISBN 978-628-7714-42-7.

GAPAC and 4Métrica.

“All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, in whole or in part, without the prior written permission of the copyright holders.”

January, 2026.

Design and layout: Mary López.

Copyediting: Liliana Obregon.



# Contents:

|                                                                                                            |                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Scaling Authoritarian Influence: Russia, Cuba, and the Dynamics of Autocratic Cooperation in Latin America | <b><u>14</u></b> |
| Authoritarian Gravity Centers: Arenas, Modalities, and Ideas                                               | <b><u>17</u></b> |
| From Authoritarian Gravity Centers to Authoritarian Global Promoters                                       | <b><u>22</u></b> |
| Cuba: Latin America's "Progressive" Authoritarian Gravity Center                                           | <b><u>26</u></b> |
| Russia in the Latin American Autocratic Arena                                                              | <b><u>34</u></b> |
| Regional Gravity Meets Global Promotion: A Permanent Challenge                                             | <b><u>43</u></b> |
| References                                                                                                 | <b><u>47</u></b> |

# Prologue

R. Evan Ellis

*Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute*

Latin America, like the rest of the world, is currently navigating a crisis of democracy and the institutions of the rules-based international order which have underpinned the advance of global interdependence since the Second World War. The forces stressing the contemporary system are commonly lamented: The greatly expanded global flows of goods, people, finance and ideas that the democratic, rule-based order and its institutions have made possible, have also brought inequality and economic displacement, clashes between ideas and cultures, migratory pressures, and transnational organized crime, in the process fostering corruption, violent criminal competition, terrorism and other harms.

Democratic governments and institutions have struggled to manage perceptions that their performance in addressing such maladies has been inadequate. Meanwhile, that same hyperconnectivity of commerce, people and ideas, accelerated by global data flows and decentralized social media, has fueled grievances, atomization, and polarization within those besieged democracies, putting even more pressure on those systems and institutions. These processes have impaired the ability of those democracies and institutions to reconcile diverging desires and interests, as well as the ability of market economies to distribute goods and generate wealth to the satisfaction of diverse populations.

Further complicating these corrosive dynamics, the institutions and interconnectivity of the rules-based order has also facilitated the emergence of the authoritarian People's Republic of China (PRC) as a global manufacturing, and increasingly, technological and military power. For many global observers, particularly in the "less developed" parts of the world, the ability of the PRC to bring rapid--albeit



distorted--development through a state-led model, and its ability to harness technology to bring perceived efficiency and order, has deepened questions about democracy, market economic mechanisms, and the rules-based order, in ways that the moribund Soviet Union during the Cold War never could. Adding even more pressure, the growing global adoption of PRC information architectures for communications, security, economic and urban management is imposing new de facto standards regarding the empowerment of government and ever more limited individual protection in the digital domain.

With democratic governance, market-based economies, and the rules-based order dominated by Western-style institutions increasingly under siege, the role of the PRC in empowering a diverse array of authoritarian regimes through mutually self-serving interactions has received increasing scholarly attention. At the same time, however, the mechanisms of propagating authoritarianism beyond the PRC have received less focus.

In the past twenty years, the hijacking of democratic governments in Venezuela and Nicaragua with the perceived help of Russia and Cuba have revived concerns of populist authoritarian contagion among besieged democracies. In the current era, however, the ideological diversity of authoritarian regimes, from Cuba to post-Communist Russia, to theocratic Iran, to North Korea, to Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia, among others, render inadequate the Communist subversion model of authoritarian contagion widely used by scholars and policymakers during the Cold War.

The innovation of the present work by Armando Chaguaceda and César Eduardo Santos is that it studies the international relations dynamics of authoritarianism in its diversity. It does not focus so much on those regime's ideological characteristics or internal dynamics. Rather, it examines the mechanisms through which such regimes propagate themselves in their near abroad and beyond.

---



Using the innovative concepts of “Authoritarian Centers of Gravity” and “Authoritarian Global Promoters,” the present work examines Russia and Cuba, two authoritarian regimes of significantly different power, ideology, and geography. It examines their activities within a single region, Latin America, to show how they protect and spread authoritarianism.

In the case of Cuba, their analysis includes how the Communist regime of that country demonstrates authoritarian control mechanisms in ways that can be copied by others such as Venezuela, as well as how Cuba exports its model through its diplomats, international forums, and foreign collaboration activities such as doctors.

In the Russian case, the work examines mechanisms such as elite capture, propaganda and social media mechanisms, multilateral alliances, and military and cyber support. Importantly, it also considers the interaction between Cuba as an authoritarian center of gravity, and Russia as an authoritarian global promoter, in the same region, where the two are not always perfectly aligned.

The work is an important read for those wishing to understand some of the key dynamics of the preservation and spread of authoritarianism in a world in which legacy concepts of democracy, rule of law, and institutions are increasingly besieged.

---



# Prologue

María Isabel Puerta

*Professor of Political Science at Valencia College*

In the complex landscape of twenty-first-century geopolitics, the traditional frameworks for understanding power projection and regional influence have become insufficient to capture a critical transformative phenomenon: the systematic cooperation between authoritarian regimes to challenge democratic governance across borders. While scholarly attention has mostly focused on the rise of great powers and their conventional tools for influence, economic investment, military partnerships, and diplomatic leverage, a more discreet but equally consequential process has been unfolding under the watch of the international community.

This contribution dissects how two apparently dissimilar autocracies, post-Soviet Russia and revolutionary Cuba, have developed complex mechanisms for projecting authoritarian influence far beyond what their material resources might suggest possible. This is an insightful analysis of their activities in Latin America, revealing patterns of cooperation that challenge conventional assumptions about how small states and middle powers shape their regional environments, and how authoritarian regimes conceal their goals in an allegedly democratic age.

The phenomenon the authors investigate is neither entirely new nor completely unprecedented. Throughout the Cold War, ideological blocs competed for influence through proxy conflicts, alliance systems, and the export of competing models of governance. What distinguishes the contemporary period is the emergence of these “Authoritarian Gravity Centers” (AGCs), durable autocratic regimes that systematically cultivate networks of influence to promote illiberal norms, practices, and institutions across their blocs and beyond. Unlike traditional regional hegemons, these actors



achieve significant influence not through overwhelming material superiority, but through the strategic deployment of ideational resources, institutional capture, and transnational network building.

The cases of Cuba and Russia in Latin America reflect several critical dynamics that extend far beyond these particular actors or a specific region. In first place, they demonstrate how authoritarian regimes adapt to hostile international environments by developing asymmetric strategies that leverage their comparative advantages, Cuba's revolutionary legitimacy and extensive diplomatic apparatus, Russia's energy resources and information warfare capabilities. Secondly, they reveal how regional and global authoritarian cooperation networks create mutually reinforcing cycles of illiberal diffusion, where local autocratization processes become linked to broader challenges to the liberal international order.

What is most significant, this analysis introduces a conceptual distinction between Authoritarian Gravity Centers, which primarily operate within their immediate neighborhoods, and the term "Authoritarian Global Promoters" (AGPs), regimes that scale their influence operations across multiple regions through institutionalized transnational associations. This distinction helps explain how countries like Cuba and Russia, despite their different material capabilities and ideological orientations, can simultaneously function as regional influencers and global disruptors of democratic norms.

The urgency of understanding these dynamics has only intensified in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, democratic backsliding in established democracies, rising authoritarianism globally, and conflicts like Russia's invasion of Ukraine have created new opportunities for authoritarian cooperation while exposing the vulnerabilities of democratic institutions and alliances. In Latin America specifically, the combination of economic inequality, institutional weakness, and historical grievances against Western democracies has created a fertile ground for the narratives and networks promoted by autocratic actors.

---



Still this study also reveals reasons for measured optimism. By mapping the mechanisms through which authoritarian influence operates, we can better understand its limitations and develop more effective strategies for democratic resilience. The very fact that countries like Cuba and Russia must invest so heavily in ideational influence and network building suggests that their appeal is neither automatic nor irresistible. Democratic actors who understand these dynamics can develop more effective responses that address the underlying conditions that make authoritarian alternatives attractive while directly countering illiberal narratives and practices.

This research contributes to several ongoing scholarly and policy debates. For students of authoritarianism, it provides new frameworks for understanding how autocratic regimes sustain themselves through external cooperation. For scholars, it offers insights into how non-traditional forms of power projection operate in the contemporary global system. For policymakers, it maps specific mechanisms through which democratic norms and institutions come under pressure, suggesting concrete areas for intervention and reinforcement.

The methodology employed by the authors combines careful case study analysis with broader theoretical reflection, drawing on extensive documentation of Cuban and Russian activities across multiple domains, diplomatic, military, ideational, and institutional. Rather than relying solely on official statements or high-level agreements, they examine the concrete practices through which authoritarian influence operates: the scholarship programs that shape future elites, the media partnerships that disseminate particular narratives, the military cooperation agreements that create strategic dependencies, and the multilateral forums that provide platforms for mutual protection.

In the analysis presented here, it is important to acknowledge that the authors do not claim that authoritarian cooperation represents the dominant force shaping contemporary Latin American politics, nor suggest that democratic breakdown is

---



inevitable wherever such influence operates. Instead, they argue that understanding these dynamics is essential for anyone seeking to comprehend the full range of challenges facing democratic governance in the twenty-first century.

The stakes of this inquiry extend well beyond academic understanding. In a world where the future of democratic governance remains contested, the ability to recognize, analyze, and respond to authoritarian influence operations may prove decisive for the survival and expansion of open societies. This study represents one contribution to that crucial commitment.

# Scaling Authoritarian Influence: Russia, Cuba, and the Dynamics of Autocratic Cooperation in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In the post–Cold War world, amidst various challenges and crises affecting the liberal order, autocratic cooperation has expanded through the diffusion and promotion of authoritarian ideas, institutions, norms, and practices. Within this process, the geopolitical role of so-called Authoritarian Gravity Centers (AGCs) is essential. In Latin America, Cuba and Russia have, for several decades—both separately and jointly—developed an effective and sustained process of forging links for the promotion and dissemination of authoritarianism, engaging a wide range of ideologically and politically aligned governmental and societal actors across the region. We show that Cuba and Russia act as AGCs in their neighborhood and, in certain domains, deploy transregional strategies consistent with the profile of Authoritarian Global Promoters (AGPs).

**Keywords:** Autocratic cooperation, Authoritarian Gravity Centers, Cuba, Russia, Latin America.

*The USSR was doomed to fail (...) Cuba and North Korea are even more so. They are not countries but rather Frankenstein monsters. Yet, they have survived their creator (...) we underestimate how resilient modern autocracies are.*

—Alexei Navalny, Patriot. Memory, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2024

---

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary Spanish version of this work focused on Cuba case was published in *De Política*, the research journal of the Mexican Association of Political Science (AMECIP). Available at: <https://www.amecip.com/publicacion/detalle?id=55>

These words from the assassinated Russian dissident resonate as we write this text, helping to illuminate the phenomenon of external influence and cooperation which, together with domestic control, contributes to the resilience of certain autocracies in the twenty-first century. Exploring this topic through the cases of Russia—a closed Eurasian autocracy with a globally recognizable agenda and actions—and Cuba—the only totalitarian-rooted autocracy in the history and present of the Western Hemisphere—reveals a subject still underexplored within our scholarly community and, more broadly, across the regional intellectual and public opinion fields. This gap results from a combination of ideological biases, deficits in access to information sources, and a deliberate or unconscious dismissal of the scientific and political significance of the subject itself.<sup>2</sup>

Autocratic cooperation can be defined, following Bank and Weyland (2019)<sup>3</sup>, as a form of deliberate and relatively asymmetric coordination among political actors that guides the exchange of resources—economic, political, military, cultural, among others—to promote agendas and objectives opposed to the democratic order. Understood as a mode of resistance to endogenous and global processes of democratization, autocratic cooperation seeks to consolidate and legitimize established dictatorial regimes while expanding the global influence of various illiberal and antiliberal alternatives. Understanding this phenomenon requires identifying its sources, locating and explaining its operational mechanisms, and comprehending the motivations of the actors involved in both the promotion and reception of authoritarian ideas, institutions, and practices.

---

<sup>2</sup> The conceptual framework of this text draws from several works on the subject, among which we highlight: Marianne Kneuer and Thomas Demmelhuber, *Authoritarian Gravity Centers: A Cross-Regional Study of Authoritarian Promotion and Diffusion* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Andre Bank and Kurt Weyland, eds., *Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Interests vs Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2019); A. Cassani and L. Tomini, *Autocratization in Post-Cold War Political Regimes* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Johannes Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Cooptation in Autocratic Regimes,” *Democratization* 20 (2013): 13–38; and Thomas Rid, *Desinformación y guerra política: Historia de un siglo de falsificaciones y engaños* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> André Bank and Kurt Weyland, *Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Interests vs. Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2019), <https://www.routledge.com/Authoritarian-Diffusion-and-Cooperation-Interests-vs-Ideology/Bank-Weyland/p/book/9780367587161>.



## Authoritarian Gravity Centers: Arenas, Modalities, and Ideas

Within this framework, the existence and regional activities of countries that have become Authoritarian Gravity Centers (AGCs)—such as post-Castrist Cuba and Putin’s Russia—are of critical importance. These illiberal regimes demonstrate a vocation, will, and capacity to influence their geopolitical neighborhoods, in convergence with regional partners, constructing shared identities and alliances. According to the literature on the subject<sup>4</sup>, certain criteria define an AGC: durability as an autocratic regime for at least five years; the capacity to play a decisive role in its regional environment through material capabilities, ideological influence, or a combination of both; and a high degree of connection with targeted countries. Unlike regional hegemons, traditional indicators of political analysis—such as GDP, demographic size, territorial dimension, and military power—are not sufficient to assess the real projection capacity of an AGC. Both Cuba and Russia meet these criteria within their respective contexts.<sup>5</sup> While the regional level concentrates the effectiveness of promotion and diffusion, some AGCs—such as Cuba and Russia—project, in specific domains, transregional strategies, a trait of Authoritarian Global Promoters (AGPs).

---

<sup>4</sup> Kneuer and Demmelhuber, *Authoritarian Gravity Centers*.

<sup>5</sup> On the topic of Russia’s asymmetric influence capabilities in relation to other powers such as China and the United States, see: Kathryn Stoner, “The Putin Myth,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023): 5–18, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0020>; Krystyna Marcinek and Eugeniu Han, “Russia’s Asymmetric Response to 21st Century Strategic Competition: Robotization of the Armed Forces” (RAND Corporation, March 13, 2023), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1233-5.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-5.html); and César Eduardo Santos, “Revisiting the Russian Threat in Central America,” *Diálogo Américas* (blog), October 9, 2024, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/revisiting-the-russian-threat-in-central-america/>

AGCs do not operate solely bilaterally; they also participate in or foster the creation of multilateral and regional organizations through which they exercise influence and, at times, hegemony. Within these organizations, they exploit socioeconomic, institutional, cultural, and linguistic factors that facilitate convergence with other aligned regimes and actors (parties, movements, intellectuals), with the objective of countering demands from democratic actors. All these efforts aim to strengthen the stability and legitimacy of the AGC itself and to empower authoritarian allies within their regional and extra-regional environments—whether activists, cadres, or authoritarian politicians in defective democracies or hybrid regimes—thus promoting autocratic empowerment.

Through its various modalities, autocratic cooperation by AGCs with their allies is channeled across different arenas of action. In the institutional arena, measures are promoted to modify the political regimes of target countries, altering electoral systems and the balance of powers, expanding presidential authority, and reducing civil and political liberties. In the political-administrative arena, a range of agencies and resources—financial, repressive, and media-related—support liberticidal goals. The ideational dimension—networks for the dissemination and synchronization of ideas, values, narratives, and authoritarian attitudes regarding the desirable political order—gains importance in a world where, despite factual democratic backsliding, the symbolic and semantic value of democratic discourse still holds significant weight in the post–Cold War era. Consequently, AGCs often pursue ideational and identity missions within their regions, seeking to reinforce their domestic stability and legitimacy and to enhance their external attractiveness. To this end, they actively export to geographically and culturally proximate countries various ideas and political rules intended to thwart or repel democratic advances through diverse networks of knowledge exchange, education, and authoritarian practices.

It is important to highlight that while conservative autocracies—the majority in historical and international terms—do not typically carry a highly refined or attractive ideological project, operating mainly with a defensive “perimeter security” agenda, totalitarian-type autocracies—including post-revolutionary regimes like Cuba’s—grant greater importance to ideology as a driver of their global projection. Although ideological factors are always present, even if only behind propaganda and diplomatic agendas, cooperation between autocratic regimes takes on a qualitatively different nature when involving revolutionary regimes with missionary approaches to global influence—such as Castro’s Cuba, the Ayatollahs’ Iran, and Mao’s China. In these cases, the transformations generated in their areas of influence are qualitatively distinct. Even today in Latin America, authors<sup>6</sup> who emphasize the diffuse and pragmatic character of contemporary dictator collaboration acknowledge the existence of regional experiences (e.g., Venezuela–Nicaragua collaboration) where ideological content plays a leading role, within geopolitical alliances featuring more clearly defined ideological profiles (e.g., Bolivarianism).

As scholarly understanding of autocratic cooperation expands, a certain consensus has emerged regarding its different modalities. Through promotion, an actor—usually an established autocratic regime—deliberately and actively encourages the spread of authoritarian ideas, institutions, and practices to neighboring countries through incentives or pressures. This promotion can occur via control (military intervention, regime change agendas), hard leverage (planned incentives or pressures), or soft leverage (non-coercive persuasion), each presenting varying degrees of duration, penetration, and impact, and motivated by pragmatic, ideological, or mixed intentions. Depending on the geopolitical and historical context, promotion manifests in different variants: autocratic prevention (to forestall democratization processes before they gain traction), autocratic empowerment (consolidating like-minded actors in non-autocratic countries), and autocratic consolidation (supporting entrenched allies in closing off political competition altogether).

---

<sup>6</sup> Carlos de la Torre, “Hugo Chávez and the Diffusion of Bolivarianism,” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (November 10, 2017): 1271–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1307825>; André Bank, “The Study of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Comparative Lessons on Interests versus Ideology, Nowadays and in History,” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (November 10, 2017): 1345–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1312349>.

Meanwhile, diffusion operates through demonstration effects, whereby local elites with authoritarian tendencies seek to replicate elements of foreign regimes to emulate their legitimacy, practical success, or both. Diffusion always generates a demonstration effect—whether through partial or total copying of models or limited policy emulation—and fosters the emergence of regional coalitions between diffusing and influenced actors. Within this process, the transfer and incorporation of ideas, institutions, and policies occur through various sequences of adoption and anti-democratic transformation.

Autocratic cooperation networks play a key role in facilitating communication and mobilization among actors, disseminating tactics, resources, and ideas, fostering new alliances, and encouraging the adoption of authoritarian practices. These networks operate through forums—international summits, party meetings, and social movement gatherings—organized to varying degrees of formality, where one country or process serves as an example for others. The communication and coordination flows among these autocratic actors form genuine epistemic communities tasked with disseminating ideas, norms, organizations, and practices, with varying degrees of centralization, formalization, and success. Cuba’s role in fostering authoritarianism within the Latin American context offers a compelling illustration of these dynamics. These same networks allow certain AGCs to scale up their action beyond the neighborhood, operating as Authoritarian Global Promoters when they institutionalize transcontinental linkages.

**Table 1.****Russia and Cuba: Political Regime Characteristics Relevant to AGC/AGP Roles**

| Dimension                       | Russia                                                                                                                           | Cuba                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Elite selection</b>          | Predominantly through informal patronal networks, security services, and co-opted parties; loyalty to Putin central.             | Through the Communist Party (PCC) hierarchy and state apparatus; highly institutionalized cadre system.                    |
| <b>Leadership</b>               | Personalized rule under Vladimir Putin; concentration of power in presidency; weak checks.                                       | Collective but hegemonized leadership; Miguel Díaz-Canel as First Secretary/President, under continuity of Castro lineage. |
| <b>Ideology</b>                 | Nationalist–sovereignist discourse; conservative values; multipolarity and anti-Westernism; pragmatic use of Orthodox tradition. | Marxist–Leninist socialism with adaptations; anti-imperialism; emphasis on continuity of revolutionary legitimacy.         |
| <b>Regime type</b>              | Competitive authoritarianism / electoral authoritarianism (formally multiparty, elections tightly controlled).                   | One-party socialist state; absence of competitive elections; PCC monopoly over politics.                                   |
| <b>Institutional durability</b> | Post-Soviet consolidation since early 2000s; resilience despite crises and sanctions.                                            | Continuous single-party rule since 1959; one of the world's longest-lasting authoritarian regimes.                         |
| <b>International projection</b> | Great-power ambition; military, energy, and media diplomacy across regions.                                                      | Soft-power activism (medical diplomacy, G77, NAM legacy); dense diplomatic network disproportionate to size.               |

Source: Own elaboration.

## From Authoritarian Gravity Centers to Authoritarian Global Promoters

While the concept of Authoritarian Gravity Centers (AGCs) has become central to the study of authoritarian cooperation and diffusion, particularly for capturing the efficacy of regional clustering, it leaves underexplored those cases where regimes deliberately seek to project influence beyond their immediate neighborhood. Indeed, the AGC framework convincingly shows how durable autocracies shape their regional environment by mobilizing material and ideational resources, cultivating dense linkages with proximate targets, and exploiting regional organizations as force multipliers. In this literature, as we've shown, regionness is not incidental but foundational to effectiveness: proximity, pre-existing ties, and shared venues shorten the distance for promotion and diffusion to travel and stick (hence the emphasis on "playing the regional card"). In fact, studies of China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia within their neighborhoods underscore that AGCs aggregate influence by turning regional platforms into arenas of socialization and protection for illiberal allies.

Building on this regional core, we propose an analytical extension—authoritarian global promoters (AGPs)—to designate those autocracies that, while operating as AGCs at home, also project repertoires, norms, and networks beyond their immediate neighborhood on a deliberate, transregional basis. The shift from AGC to AGP is thus one of scale and purpose. Rather than stopping at the consolidation of a regional sphere, AGPs seek to reframe rules and agendas at the global level, institutionalizing cross-continental linkages (media ecosystems, party-to-party channels, epistemic communities, and diplomatic blocs) and leveraging multilateral forums to normalize illiberal precepts across regions. This move resonates

with the interests–ideology distinction: as Weyland<sup>7</sup> argues, actors animated by missionary ideologies attempt active promotion “in a wide range of countries” and stimulate diffusion globally, whereas interest-driven regimes chiefly pursue defensive cooperation to immunize their sphere and fortify a regional ring of influence. The AGP notion formalizes the former as a sustained, outward-facing posture that adds a transregional layer to the gravitational dynamics captured by AGCs.

Placed against this conceptual backdrop, Cuba and Russia are useful hybrids. Both meet AGC criteria in their respective neighborhoods, yet at times scale up those same instruments to transregional arenas. Cuba’s oversized diplomatic footprint, recurrent activism in UN bodies, leadership roles within the G77, and routinized medical diplomacy and solidarity networks translate regional sharp power into inter-regional presence. Russia, while acting as an AGC in its “near abroad,” also projects outwards through Spanish-language global media, cross-regional diplomatic shielding, arms and security cooperation, and ideational campaigns that travel into Latin America—an outward posture consistent with what we term an authoritarian global promoter.

In both cases, regional efficacy remains pivotal, but select domains—multilateral diplomacy, party/movement linkages, transnational media—evidence a deliberate transregional horizon where promotion and diffusion are neither accidental nor merely derivative of regional activism. This distinction not only sharpens our analytical toolkit but also helps illuminate how Latin America has become a stage where regional AGCs—such as Cuba—and transregional authoritarian global promoters—such as Russia in selected domains—intersect, thereby linking local autocratization processes with the broader erosion of the liberal international order.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Autocratic Diffusion and Cooperation: The Impact of Interests vs. Ideology,” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (2017): 1235–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1307823>.

**Table 2.****AGCs vs. AGPs: Regional Gravity or Transregional Projection?**

| Feature          | Authoritarian Gravity Centers (AGCs)                                                                          | Authoritarian Global Promoters (AGPs)                                                                                                          |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scale & intent   | Predominantly regional; optimize influence in the neighborhood via pull–push dynamics and regional platforms. | Transregional projection by design; seek to reshape agendas and norms beyond the neighborhood.                                                 |
| Primary arenas   | Regional organizations, proximate bilateral ties, localized epistemic communities.                            | Multilateral forums (UN/G77/BRICS+), cross-continental media/party networks, global epistemic communities.                                     |
| Motivational mix | Often interest-dominant and defensive: immunization, regime survival, fortifying the sphere.                  | Ideationally salient missions enable outward promotion and wider diffusion alongside interests.                                                |
| Cuba & Russia    | Operate as AGCs in their respective neighborhoods.                                                            | In selected domains, scale up to transregional strategies (Cuba’s medical diplomacy/G77 activism; Russia’s global media/diplomatic shielding). |

Table 2. The table clarifies the scaling logic rather than reclassifying cases wholesale. In our evidence, Cuba and Russia remain AGCs regionally, while certain practices document AGP-type projection across regions.



**FIDEL CASTRO**

## Cuba: Latin America's “Progressive” Authoritarian Gravity Center<sup>8</sup>

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the global landscape became increasingly hostile to authoritarian regimes. Without their principal ally, the Soviet Union, Cuba and North Korea faced the challenge of maintaining a Leninist-style government without substantial reforms. In the wake of the failed promotion of guerrilla movements during the 1960s and 1970s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban regime—like its North Korean counterpart—required new narratives, resources, and strategies to survive in a world marked by U.S. hegemony and the rise of a liberal international order.

Although closely aligned in their revolutionary rhetoric and defiant isolation, Cuba and North Korea differ significantly in the contexts they face and the means they use to confront them. Pyongyang, located between two allied authoritarian superpowers (Russia and China), turned to nuclear blackmail, developing nuclear weapons and adopting a bellicose posture. Havana, unable to resort to military threats due to its proximity to the American superpower—and no longer supported by a strategic ally willing to deploy military assets, as the Soviets once did—opted for a strategy of controlled normalization with the West. The Cuban regime deployed diplomatic initiatives and sought foreign cooperation and investment, promoting narratives of normalcy, responsibility, and non-belligerence.

---

<sup>8</sup>For the analysis of the Cuban case, particularly the link between the internal authoritarian order and its regional influence, we recommend: Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Y. Camero et al., *Sharp Power y Redes Intellectuales: La Presencia de Cuba en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: GAPAC/Dunken, 2023); Sebastian Grundberger, *The Pink Galaxy: How the Foro de São Paulo, the Grupo de Puebla, and Their International Allies Undermine Democracy in Latin America* (Montevideo: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2024); Miguel Angel Martinez Meucci and Armando Chaguaceda, “El rebranding de la revolución: las reinenciones de la extrema izquierda en América Latina,” in *La extrema izquierda en Europa Occidental. Iliberalismo y amenazas para la democracia*, edited by Edurne Uriarte and Ángel Rivero (Madrid: Tecnos, 2024); and Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9–23.

Cuba's sharp power<sup>9</sup> —which has achieved significant spatial reach across both the Global North and South, and temporal endurance over six and a half decades—has been central to its influence, forming generations of cadres, activists, and propagandists, and presenting the island internationally as an exemplar of “progressive governance.”<sup>10</sup>

There is a major distinction between the traditional factors of hard power (GDP, demographics, armed forces)—which are largely unavailable to the Cuban regime—and the asymmetric influence resources clustered around its regional and global networks. While the former (dependent on economic support) have eroded amid Cuba's prolonged social and economic crises, the latter have strengthened as the regime's strategies and actors embedded in those networks have matured. Positioned between these two forms of power projection, Cuba's domestic control mechanisms and tactics have been successfully exported—tested and refined—in allied or client states such as Venezuela, and to a lesser extent, Nicaragua and Bolivia.

For instance, since the founding of the Castro regime—and despite its limited economic capacity and poor human rights record—Cuba's ruling elite has, through a disproportionately large diplomatic and intelligence apparatus, secured the island's election to the UN Human Rights Council six times since its creation. Moreover, in 2023, after more than fifty years of membership in the Group of 77 plus China, Cuba was elected to lead the bloc, originally founded to advocate for the economic interests of the Global South and to strengthen their collective bargaining power within the UN. In its search for broader cooperation, the Cuban regime has also recently pursued strategic partnerships with countries far beyond its traditional sphere of influence but with whom it shares authoritarian experiences and mutual learnings. Perhaps the most notable contemporary example is Cuba's accession as an observer state to the Eurasian Economic Union.

---

<sup>9</sup> Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?”

<sup>10</sup> Camero et al., *Sharp Power y Redes Intelectuales*.

Cuba's success in these arenas has been made possible, among other factors, by the regime's extensive diplomatic network: over 200 diplomatic missions in more than 180 countries—surpassing those of geographically and economically larger states such as Argentina, Canada, or Italy. This diplomatic apparatus enables Havana to coordinate with other authoritarian regimes and to occupy key spaces in international debates and organizations. For example, Cuba has used its near-permanent seat on the Human Rights Council—thanks to successive reelections—to block or undermine discussions concerning human rights abuses in countries led by its authoritarian allies.

An analysis by the Argentine organization CADAL<sup>11</sup>, covering the first twelve years of Cuba's membership in the Human Rights Council<sup>12</sup> (up to 2020), shows that out of 205 resolutions addressing global human rights situations, Cuba opposed 74 and supported 66. Of the supported resolutions, 62 related to issues in the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights; the remaining four addressed situations in Darfur, Congo, Honduras, and Burundi. Among the resolutions Cuba opposed were those condemning or calling for action against human rights violations in North Korea, Iran, Belarus, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Most strikingly, of the 74 votes against resolutions on human rights abuses, Cuba voted alongside China in 73 cases and alongside Russia and Venezuela in 42 instances.

---

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel C. Salvia, "Las sillas del Consejo, autoritarismos y democracias en la evolución de la integración del órgano de DDHH de la ONU" (CADAL, December 10, 2020), <https://www.cadal.org/publicaciones/informes/?id=13365>.

<sup>12</sup> Since the creation of the Human Rights Council in 2006, Cuba has managed its election and maintained an almost permanent seat on this United Nations body, except for the mandatory two-year waiting period required before a member who has served two consecutive terms can seek reelection. After completing its required hiatus in 2023—and despite the significant deterioration of the human rights situation on the island following the massive popular protests of July 2021—the Cuban regime was once again elected to a seat on the Council, where it will serve until 2026.

Additionally, Cuba has used its networks to promote authoritarian practices through some of its most publicized “achievements,” particularly its “medical missions” (health service exports). International reports and complaints have documented the role Cuban doctors have played in spreading authoritarian ideas conceived in Havana and, under directive, engaging in political activities to influence electoral processes, particularly in Venezuela. Thus, Cuba acts as an AGC in its neighborhood and, in certain domains—through the G77, medical diplomacy, and solidarity networks—deploys transregional strategies consistent with an Authoritarian Global Promoter profile.

Recently, this model of cooperation has deepened in Mexico, where the leftist governments of the so-called Fourth Transformation have brought in nearly 600 Cuban doctors to address shortages in rural hospitals. These “exchanges” of professionals not only promote the semiotic codes of authoritarianism crafted in Havana but also establish stronger connections between the Cuban Communist Party regime and Mexico, currently governed by a political force criticized for its power-concentrating practices, press repression, and stigmatization of opposition groups. More importantly, they ensure concrete material support for Cuba: for example, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum confirmed that, amid Cuba’s deep energy crisis at the end of 2024, Mexico sent over 400,000 barrels of crude oil—worth about 26 million dollars—to the island.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, during the same energy crisis, the Colombian Movement for Solidarity with Cuba launched a local campaign to mobilize support for the island, arguing that U.S. sanctions were the primary cause of Cuba’s hardships. The campaign aimed to pressure for Cuba’s removal from the U.S. State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism. It culminated in a national meeting where Colombian Labor Minister Gloria Inés Ramírez condemned the U.S. sanctions as “infamous and criminal” and called for Cuba’s removal from the terrorist list.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C., “México exporta a Cuba no solo petróleo, también apoyo académico,” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), May 17, 2024, <http://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/mexico-exporta-a-cuba-no-solo-petroleo-tambien-apoyo-academico/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ivette Fernández, “Solidaridad en Colombia refrenda apoyo a Cuba contra el bloqueo,” Prensa Latina, September 30, 2024, <https://publica.prensa-latina.cu/pub/solidaridad-en-colombia-refrenda-apoyo-a-cuba-contra-el-bloqueo>.

Three months later, on January 14, 2025, following the Biden administration's announcement of Cuba's removal from the list, Colombia's Foreign Minister declared that his government had played a role—alongside the Pope and Brazilian President Lula da Silva—in influencing the White House's decision.

In this sense, it is evident that throughout 2024, Cuba engaged in an intense campaign of diplomatic, economic, and political activity in Latin America, consolidating its role as an Authoritarian Gravity Center (AGC) in the region. An analysis by the research team at Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C. (GAPAC)<sup>15</sup>, a Mexico-based think tank, highlights numerous initiatives that reinforced cooperation networks, solidified strategic alliances, and amplified Havana's political and ideological narrative. Cuban actions were neither generic nor dispersed; rather, they were concrete and focused on events that reaffirm the expected patterns for AGCs.

In the sphere of multilateral diplomacy, Cuba actively sought to expand its influence in regional and global forums. In May, a Cuban delegation participated in the UN Security Council's open debate on Palestine, reiterating support for “anti-imperialist” causes and strengthening ties with states critical of U.S. hegemony. In November, Cuba's participation at the UN General Assembly resulted in overwhelming support for the resolution condemning the embargo, consolidating its diplomatic backing across several continents. Furthermore, Cuba intensified its activity within the Group of 77 plus China, promoting a South-South solidarity narrative that resonated with many countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

---

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Cuba's regional influence operations during 2024, see: Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C., “Cuba en Latinoamérica, paradoja y realidad de la influencia autoritaria,” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), October 10, 2024, <http://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/cuba-en-latinoamerica-paradoja-y-realidad-de-la-influencia-autoritaria/>; and Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C., “Cuba en América Latina: la influencia persistente,” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), December 14, 2024, <https://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/cuba-en-america-latina-la-influencia-persistente/>.

In forums such as the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), Cuba secured the adoption of resolutions condemning the embargo after an intense diplomatic campaign.

Regarding the construction of ideological and social networks, Havana deployed a vigorous and diversified strategy. The XXVIII National Solidarity Meeting with Cuba, held in Mexico, brought together more than 40 organizations that signed a declaration of support for the island. In October, the International Solidarity Seminar in Mexico City gathered delegations from 17 countries, proclaiming their commitment to the “anti-imperialist resistance” led by Cuba. Similar forums were held in Uruguay and Bolivia, reaffirming the narrative of resistance promoted from Havana.

In the realm of cultural and symbolic projection, Cuba promoted a wide range of activities throughout the year. The Havana International Book Fair in February featured cultural delegations from Argentina, Venezuela, and Bolivia and served as a platform for strengthening ideological ties through cultural diplomacy. In December, on the 66th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, tributes were organized in Santiago de Chile, Caracas, and Buenos Aires, involving academic activities, exhibitions, and political events. In the sports arena, Cuba sent delegations to events in Nicaragua and Venezuela, reinforcing its image as a champion of “international solidarity.”

In terms of mobilizing regional support, solidarity movements played a crucial and multifaceted role. In Mexico, leftist organizations held public events supporting Cuba under the “Todos somos Cuba” campaign. In Chile, social collectives and political parties staged solidarity events involving the dissemination of propaganda materials and public demonstrations. Similar initiatives were recorded in Argentina and Peru, where student and labor groups promoted university and union resolutions in support of the island.

From the perspective of diplomatic defense and support among like-minded governments, 2024 was also significant. In April, Cuban Foreign Ministry officials met with U.S. representatives to discuss migration issues, seeking to open channels of dialogue despite ongoing tensions. Simultaneously, Cuban diplomats participated in events and forums in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, denouncing the impact of international sanctions. In Brazil, figures close to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government issued public statements at international forums criticizing sanctions against Cuba and supporting its full integration into regional organizations.

The emerging pattern is clear: Cuba operates as a mature AGC, activating institutional arenas through agreements and bilateral diplomacy, mobilizing ideational networks to foster solidarity campaigns, disseminating its model of sovereign resistance, and empowering allied actors in democratic and hybrid contexts. The combination of direct promotion, demonstrative diffusion, and the strengthening of “epistemic communities” is empirically confirmed through these concrete events throughout the year.



# Russia in the Latin American Autocratic Arena

Russia's projection in Latin America over the first two decades of the twenty-first century confirms its role as an Authoritarian Gravity Center (AGC). This category, far from implying economic or military hegemony, describes an actor capable of shaping its regional environment through the diffusion of illiberal ideas, values, and practices; the symbolic or material support of anti-democratic regimes; and the consolidation of political and cultural networks that counter the advance of the Western democratic model. In Russia's case, its activity in Latin America does not rely on large-scale financial investments or decisive trade relations. Rather, it is based on building ideological affinities, systematically promoting an anti-Western narrative, providing selective military assistance, and diplomatically shielding strategic allies.

Trade figures illustrate this pattern clearly. Between 2018 and 2023, for instance, Central American exports to Russia totaled only \$350 million, compared to Russian imports exceeding \$2.7 billion<sup>16</sup>. Far removed from the levels of exchange seen between Latin America and the United States, China, or the European Union, the economic link with Russia is accessory and marginal, serving only specific needs—such as fertilizer supplies<sup>17</sup>. This data underscores that Russia's interest in Latin America is primarily political and ideational, not commercial.

Thus, Russia's strategy unfolds across several arenas of action consistent with its nature as an AGP Through the co-optation of academic and cultural

---

<sup>16</sup> Javier Ramón Meléndez Quiñónez, "Influencia chino-rusa en Centroamérica" (Fundación Naumann, May 31, 2024), <https://www.freiheit.org/es/central-america/influencia-chino-rusa-en-centroamerica>.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of the emerging trade and investment relations between Russia and Latin American countries, see Martin Vladimirov and Daria Osipova, "Global Reach: The Kremlin Playbook in Latin America" (Center for the Study of Democracy, September 2024), <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/global-reach/>.

elites, coordinated dissemination of anti-Western propaganda, selective military assistance to autocratic governments, and diplomatic protection in multilateral forums, Russia has built a network of alliances in Latin America that strengthens its global resistance project against the liberal order. This strategy combines traditional methods of influence (such as military cooperation) with contemporary tactics of information warfare and ideational diffusion, achieving notable results in legitimizing illiberal and antiliberal allies and eroding democratic consensus across the region.

The following analysis examines these arenas of action in detail, illustrating how, through concrete actions, Russia has entrenched itself as a disruptive and persistent actor in Latin America without the need for conventional economic dominance. Moscow's actions not only consolidate its illiberal allies but actively shape the discursive and political frameworks that ensure their survival and expansion.

## ***Ideational Arena: Capturing Elites and Shaping Narratives***

Russia's consolidation as an AGP in Latin America rests, first and foremost, on its ability to capture intellectual and academic elites, install favorable narratives for its geopolitical project, and deploy an intense media offensive with a clear anti-Western focus. This ideational arena is a fundamental pillar of Russia's strategy in the region, aimed at transforming cognitive frameworks and political perceptions among elites and broader societal sectors.

Since the post-Soviet years, Moscow has reactivated scholarship programs targeting Latin American students, facilitating their education in Russian universities and cultivating lasting political affinities. Many of these graduates return to their home countries to occupy strategic roles in media, universities, think tanks, and public institutions, becoming vectors for the reproduction of Kremlin narratives. Through these networks, Russia has anchored its discourse in key spaces of knowledge production and public opinion. This ideational strategy also extends to bilateral cultural and educational cooperation agreements with allied governments. In Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, multiple agreements have been signed to promote academic exchanges, pro-Russian content dissemination, and the establishment of Russian cultural centers acting as propaganda hubs.<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, Russia has expanded its media presence through platforms such as RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo. These Kremlin-funded outlets have forged cooperation agreements with state-run media in allied countries like Venezuela's Telesur and official media in Nicaragua and Cuba. These partnerships allow Moscow's narratives to circulate widely in the regional

---

<sup>18</sup> See Meléndez Quiñónez, "Influencia Sino-Rusa en Centroamérica" and Armando Chaguaceda, Johanna Cilano Pelaez, and María Isabel Puerta, "Illiberal Narratives in Latin America: Russian and Allied Media as Vehicles of Autocratic Cooperation," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 111–23, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCMW3558>.

information ecosystem, reaching audiences far beyond its own direct media outlets. In December 2022, for instance, Sputnik signed cooperation agreements with outlets in Argentina (Ahora San Juan) and Mexico (El Soberano)<sup>19</sup>, supported by the Gorchakov Foundation—evidence of how Moscow institutionalizes Spanish-language media linkages that extend well beyond its Eurasian neighborhood.

***Russian propaganda follows a three-pronged narrative strategy:***

1. Delegitimizing Western liberal democracies,
2. Exalting the sovereign authoritarian model, and
3. Portraying Russia as a victim of a Western conspiracy.



Through reports, documentaries, interviews, and opinion pieces, Russian media portrays Western democracies as corrupt, decadent, and morally hypocritical, while framing Russia as a defender of peoples' sovereignty and a promoter of a "multipolar" world order. The influence of Russian media is not limited to official channels. As recent studies show, its messages are replicated, adapted, and amplified by a range of local media outlets, academics, and social actors across Latin America. Often, the anti-Western, pro-Russian discourse merges with local narratives of resistance to U.S. imperialism, facilitating its reception in historically anti-imperialist contexts.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> La agencia de noticias y radio Sputnik firmaron un acuerdo de cooperación con los portales de internet Ahora San Juan de Argentina y El Soberano de México," SputnikPro / InteRussia, December 15, 2022, <https://xn--c1acbl2abdlkab1og.xn--p1ai/20221215/366327.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Chaguaceda, Pelaez, y Puerta, "Illiberal Narratives in Latin America"; Johanna Cilano y Maria Isabel Puerta, "Así Nos Habla El Kremlin. Narrativa Política y Medios de Comunicación Rusos En América Latina" (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375692528\\_Asi\\_nos\\_habla\\_el\\_Kremlin\\_Narrativa\\_politica\\_y\\_medios\\_de\\_comunicacion\\_rusos\\_en\\_America\\_Latina](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375692528_Asi_nos_habla_el_Kremlin_Narrativa_politica_y_medios_de_comunicacion_rusos_en_America_Latina).

A particularly significant example of Russia's disinformation strategy emerged during critical international events, such as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Russian Spanish-language media massively promoted narratives blaming NATO and the United States for the conflict, depicting Ukrainian authorities as “Nazis” and framing Russia's intervention as a “liberation operation.” This propaganda not only sought to justify the Kremlin's actions but also to undermine regional support for sanctions and politically isolate Ukraine in multilateral forums.

## ***Diplomatic Arena:***

### ***Multilateral Protection and Strategic Alliances***

An essential component of Russia's strategy as an AGP in Latin America is its diplomatic cooperation in multilateral bodies and the establishment of relationships allowing reciprocal strategic support. This diplomatic action goes beyond defending circumstantial interests; it articulates a system of mutual protection between Moscow and its illiberal allies.

Russia has actively used its diplomatic weight to defend Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba in forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS). At the UN, Russia consistently opposed and condemned resolutions addressing human rights violations or promoting international sanctions against these regimes. For instance, in September 2024, Russia's delegation at the UN Human Rights Council condemned “the practice of using the HRC platform to vilify Nicaraguan authorities under implausible human rights pretexts.”<sup>21</sup> In 2019, during Venezuela's political crisis, Russia vetoed a U.S. resolution demanding free presidential elections and the entry of humanitarian aid.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> LaPermanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva, “Nicaragua and Russia Vote Together at the United Nations,” September 19, 2024, [https://geneva.mid.ru/en/activities/news/19-09-2024\\_nicaragua-un\\_57d04a57670b3c38fb3346cef4bc97f4/](https://geneva.mid.ru/en/activities/news/19-09-2024_nicaragua-un_57d04a57670b3c38fb3346cef4bc97f4/).

<sup>22</sup> Gerardo Lissardy, “Crisis de Venezuela: qué significa el veto de Rusia y China a la resolución de EE.UU. en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU,” BBC News Mundo, March 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47411480>.

At the OAS, although its influence is more limited, Russia coordinated with Latin American illiberal governments to obstruct critical initiatives and legitimize discourses of “sovereignty” in response to accusations of authoritarianism. Before its expulsion from the OAS in 2022 following its illegal invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation had blamed regional bodies for exacerbating violence during Venezuela’s 2017 protests.<sup>23</sup>

This diplomatic support is not unidirectional. In return, several Latin American governments supported Russia during critical moments for the Kremlin. During the UN General Assembly votes on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, countries like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Cuba either voted against condemnation resolutions or abstained, while others like El Salvador and Mexico adopted ambiguous or minimalist stances.<sup>24</sup> Consistent with this outward posture, Moscow also expanded its diplomatic footprint in Mexico after 2022—reportedly increasing accredited personnel by roughly sixty percent despite limited bilateral trade—using the embassy as a hub to amplify narratives and cultivate cross-regional ties.<sup>25</sup>

This exchange of support reflects the logic of AGPs: not merely exporting norms or defending allies—as AGCs do at regional scale—but constructing mutual resistance blocs challenging the international liberal order. In multilateral forums, these alliances consolidate narratives that relativize democratic principles and human rights, framing them as tools of Western interference.

---

<sup>24</sup> On this topic, see Armando Chaguaceda Noriega and Vladimir Rouvinski, “Russia’s Many Wars and Their Effects on Latin America,” *Latin American Policy* 14, no. 1 (2023): 204–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lamp.12290>.

<sup>25</sup> The Watch Journal, “Mexico Targeted by Russian Information Operations after Ukraine Invasion,” August 12, 2024; see also Dolia Estévez, “Spy Central: Russian Influence in Mexico,” *The Watch*, April 21, 2024, <https://thewatch-journal.com/2025/04/21/spy-central-russian-influence-in-mexico/>

## ***Military and Security Arena:***

### ***Hard Power Support to Illiberal Regimes***

Another key pillar of Russia's strategy as an AGP in Latin America is its military and security cooperation. Unlike its marginal economic presence, Russian military assistance has been consistent, significant, and symbolically powerful. Venezuela is the epicenter of Russian military cooperation in the continent.<sup>26</sup> Since Hugo Chávez's rise to power—and continuing under Nicolás Maduro—Moscow has become Caracas's principal military supplier. Between 2006 and 2013, Venezuela acquired S-300VM air defense systems, Mi-17, Mi-26, and Mi-35 helicopters, Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets, and T-72B1V tanks, along with military communications technology and training. These arms transfers not only bolstered the regime's defense capabilities but also created technological and logistical dependencies with Moscow, complicating potential political transitions.

Beyond arms sales, Russian assistance extended to intelligence and cybersecurity. Russian experts helped modernize Venezuela's surveillance systems and reinforced its social control structures, providing the regime with tools to suppress protests, monitor opposition, and fortify its repressive apparatus. In Nicaragua, Russian support acquired an even more strategic dimension. Bilateral agreements since 2012 facilitated the modernization of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces, including armored vehicles, patrol boats, and air defense systems. Most significantly, Russia installed a satellite ground station in Managua under the GLONASS program<sup>27</sup> (Russia's

---

<sup>26</sup> See Infobae, "Russia Adds Another Base in Venezuela: It Will Open a Military Helicopter Maintenance Center," Infobae, April 2, 2019, Venezuela and Americas section, <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/04/02/rusia-suma-otra-base-en-venezuela-abrira-un-centro-de-mantenimiento-de-helicopteros-militares/>; Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Venezuela's Sukhoi Fighter Jets Have Fewer Flight Hours than Average: Experts," Voice of America, July 11, 2023, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/las-7-claves-del-sukhoi-ruso-el-avion-caza-mas-avanzado-en-poder-de-venezuela/7171241.html>; and RT en Español, "Infographic: Technical-Military Cooperation Between Russia and Venezuela," RT en Español, January 14, 2015, Current Affairs section, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/163240-infografia-venezuela-rusia-armas-cooperacion>.

<sup>27</sup> Leire Ventas, "The Enigmatic Satellite Station Russia Installed in Nicaragua to 'Combat Drug Trafficking' and That Alarms the United States," BBC News Mundo, June 23, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40352903>; Kenneth Chávez, "Nicaragua and Russia Inaugurate the Powerful Satellite Monitoring System," El 19 Digital, April 6, 2017, <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/54742-nicaragua-y-rusia-inauguran-el-potente-sistema-de-monitoreo-satelital-qlonas>

alternative to GPS), officially presented as a civilian project but identified by independent research as a potential intelligence asset. Moreover, Russia opened a regional police training center in Managua, providing security forces throughout Central America with training aligned with Russian internal security models.

Symbolically, Russian military deployments in Latin America, such as the visits of warships Admiral Chabanenko and Admiral Gorshkov to Venezuelan and Cuban ports<sup>28</sup>, project Moscow's military presence into the United States' traditional "backyard," openly challenging Washington's regional hegemony. Russian military assistance has been crucial for the survival of illiberal regimes during critical periods, such as the massive protests in Venezuela (2017) and Nicaragua (2018), where Moscow's logistical and intelligence support proved vital.<sup>29</sup>

Russia's role as a security provider is also reflected in its growing, albeit still limited, participation in regional defense forums. Moscow has sought to establish direct military cooperation agreements with governments like Bolivia and Cuba, promoting technical assistance, intelligence sharing, and military personnel training. Overall, Russia's military cooperation in Latin America reveals a consistent pattern: strengthening the resilience of illiberal regimes, creating strategic dependencies, projecting symbolic power at the regional scale, and building internal control capabilities

---

<sup>28</sup> Infobae, "Russian Warships Depart Venezuela After Four Days of Technical-Military Cooperation Between Caracas and Moscow," Infobae, July 7, 2024, Venezuela and Americas section, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/07/buques-militares-rusos-abandonaron-venezuela-despues-de-cuatro-dias-de-cooperacion-tecnico-militar-entre-caracas-y-moscu/>; BBC News Mundo, "What Is Known About the Russian Fleet With a Nuclear-Powered Submarine That Arrived in Cuba (and That the U.S. Is Monitoring)," BBC News Mundo, June 12, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/crgg024373po>.

<sup>29</sup> See Julieta Pelcastre, "Russia Backs the Ortega-Murillo Regime in Repressing Its People," *Diálogo Américas* (blog), July 15, 2024, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/ortega-murillo-regime-represses-its-people-with-russias-backing/> and John E. Herbst and Jason Marczak, "Russia's Intervention in Venezuela: What's at Stake?" (Atlantic Council, September 2019), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Russia-Venezuela-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

that hinder democratization processes. These actions, although less visible in the media compared to China's investments, are fundamental to understanding Russia's strategic logic as an Authoritarian Gravity Center (AGP) in its neighborhood; moreover, in specific domains, Russia deploys transregional strategies—an outward-facing posture consistent with an emerging profile of an Authoritarian Global Promoter.

Unlike commercial or financial cooperation, whose scale is insignificant, Russian military assistance carries a structural and transformative character. Through it, Moscow not only supplies arms but also transfers authoritarian governance models, strategies of population control, and narratives of resistance to liberal hegemony. It is in this arena—more than in any other—that Russia's influence in Latin America manifests its full magnitude and depth.



## **Regional Gravity Meets Global Promotion: A Permanent Challenge**

The regional context is crucial for the dissemination of autocratic influence. In the face of these processes, the region emerges as a setting where autocracies take advantage of a shared history, culture, geography, and extended economic and political ties across space and time. Latin America has previously demonstrated (through Operation Condor, from the reactionary right) and now demonstrates (through the Bolivarian Alliance, from the revolutionary left) that autocratization transcends the borders of specific nations and ideologies. Authoritarian regimes such as Cuba's are currently working to expand the autocratic empowerment of neighboring elites (Bolivia, Mexico) and to bolster the autocratic consolidation of authoritarian processes in other countries (Nicaragua, Venezuela).

**Table 3.****Cuba and Russia as AGC and AGP in Latin America (with traits of AGPs in specific domains)<sup>30</sup>**

| Dimensions of Autocratic Cooperation | Arenas of Autocratic Cooperation                                                  |                                                                                    |                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                      | Institutional                                                                     | Political-administrative                                                           | Ideational                                                                                      |
| <b>Difussion</b>                     | Training cadres from affiliated parties and movements                             | Media agreements with allied governments                                           | Cultural programs with allied governments and institutions                                      |
| <b>Promotion</b>                     |                                                                                   |                                                                                    |                                                                                                 |
| <b><i>Prevention</i></b>             | Support for anti-system candidates with illiberal and/or authoritarian tendencies | Low-profile intelligence tasks to advance authoritarian trends                     | Educational missions to introduce illiberal and/or authoritarian narratives                     |
| <b><i>Empowerment</i></b>            | Support for populist rulers with authoritarian tendencies                         | High-profile intelligence missions to reinforce authoritarianism                   | Propaganda advisory to expand illiberal and/or authoritarian narratives                         |
| <b><i>Consolidation</i></b>          | Support for autocrats building closed authoritarian regimes                       | Intelligence and social control advisory to suppress opposition and civic autonomy | Propaganda advisory and execution for the hegemony of illiberal and/or authoritarian narratives |

<sup>30</sup> Own elaboration based on Kneuer and Demmelhuber, Authoritarian Gravity Centers.

Within this framework, the Cuban regime has operated as an AGC with enormous influence over the organizational, geopolitical, and narrative convergence between authoritarian left-wing actors and others of democratic origin and legitimacy who, for various reasons, converge in spaces of regional organization and influence, the so-called “pink galaxy”<sup>31</sup>, where Havana’s influence is decisive. These actors, networks, and ideas are part of a broader phenomenon of autocratic cooperation that often aligns with the agendas and objectives of extra-continental authoritarian regimes interested in reshaping the liberal order both globally and nationally. The convergence between regional AGCs and AGPs intensifies transnational autocratization.

Beyond political alliances, the Havana regime has successfully established networks of social movements that act as local ambassadors for its vision and its authoritarian ideas disguised as a “different democracy.” Aimed at public opinion in both the Global North and South, Havana’s propaganda influences the perceptions and attitudes of broad segments of global democratic political and intellectual elites, impacting decision-making regarding the island. This effort is further supported by the dissemination of an antiliberal ideology and an anti-American—not truly anti-imperialist—mindset across several Latin American governments and societies.

It is among these audiences that Cuba’s various sharp power narratives find fertile ground: portraying Cuba as a vulnerable victim in need of financial and material aid from governments, international organizations, NGOs, and foreign cooperation agencies (with all blame placed on the embargo); as a reliable partner in diplomacy outside formal cooperation and agreements (examples being its role in Colombian peace negotiations and medical diplomacy); and as a political model for Southern movements and governments (through various solidarity forums).

---

<sup>31</sup> Grundberger, *The Pink Galaxy*.

Adding to this dynamic is Russia, whose role as an AGP in Latin America follows a parallel logic, though with distinctive characteristics. Moscow acts in the region not through economic penetration or direct investment—as China does—but through building ideological affinities, systematically promoting anti-Western propaganda, and providing military and diplomatic support to illiberal regimes. Like Cuba, Russia operates across multiple arenas: in the ideational, through the co-optation of academic elites, media agreements, and mass disinformation; in the political-administrative, through the military strengthening of strategic allies such as Venezuela and Nicaragua; and in the multilateral, by offering diplomatic protection in international forums in exchange for political support on critical issues such as the invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's influence also capitalizes on the region's structural vulnerabilities: democratic disaffection, historical anti-Americanism, and social fractures that erode liberal consensus. In this fertile ground, Moscow deploys its media networks—RT en Español, Sputnik Mundo—disseminates its narrative of “multipolar resistance,” and legitimizes illiberal political models as sovereign alternatives to the “hypocrisy” of Western democracies. Through cadre formation, cultural cooperation agreements, and mutual diplomatic protection, Russia expands the reach of its strategic interests across the continent.

Just as Cuban actions undermine regional democratization by eroding democratic quality in allied countries, Russia's involvement reinforces this same dynamic: amplifying autocratic trends, blocking sanction or condemnation initiatives in multilateral organizations, and fostering ideational frameworks that normalize or justify authoritarian backsliding in Latin America. As we have attempted to demonstrate in this work, the tacit convergence between regional AGCs (Cuba) and extra-continental ones (Russia) creates environments and mechanisms where transnational autocratization takes increasingly sophisticated and persistent forms, threatening the very existence of democratic regimes and open, free, and just societies.

## References

Bank, André, and Kurt Weyland, eds. *Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Interests vs. Ideology*. New York: Routledge, 2019. <https://www.routledge.com/Authoritarian-Diffusion-and-Cooperation-Interests-vs-Ideology/Bank-Weyland/p/book/9780367587161>.

Bank, André. “The Study of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Comparative Lessons on Interests versus Ideology, Nowadays and in History.” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (November 10, 2017): 1345–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1312349>.

BBC News Mundo. “What Is Known About the Russian Fleet With a Nuclear-Powered Submarine That Arrived in Cuba (and That the U.S. Is Monitoring).” BBC News Mundo, June 12, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/crgg024373po>.

Camero, Y., et al. *Sharp Power y Redes Intellectuales: La Presencia de Cuba en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: GAPAC/Dunken, 2023.

Cassani, Andrea, and Luca Tomini. *Autocratization in Post-Cold War Political Regimes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Cassani, Andrea, and Luca Tomini. *Autocratization in Post-Cold War*

Chaguaceda, Armando, and Vladimir Rouvinski. “Russia’s Many Wars and Their Effects on Latin America.” *Latin American Policy* 14, no. 1 (2023): 204–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lamp.12290>.

Chaguaceda, Armando, Johanna Cilano Pelaez, and Maria Isabel Puerta. “Illiberal Narratives in Latin America: Russian and Allied Media as

Vehicles of Autocratic Cooperation.” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 111–23. <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCMW3558>.

Chávez, Kenneth. “Nicaragua and Russia Inaugurate the Powerful Satellite Monitoring System.” *El 19 Digital*, April 6, 2017. <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/54742-nicaragua-y-rusia-inauguran-el-potente-sistema-de-monitoreo-satelital-qlonas>.

Cilano, Johanna, and Maria Isabel Puerta. *Así Nos Habla El Kremlin: Narrativa Política y Medios de Comunicación Rusos En América Latina*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375692528\\_Asi\\_nos\\_habla\\_el\\_Kremlin\\_Narrativa\\_politica\\_y\\_medios\\_de\\_comunicacion\\_rusos\\_en\\_America\\_Latina](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375692528_Asi_nos_habla_el_Kremlin_Narrativa_politica_y_medios_de_comunicacion_rusos_en_America_Latina).

de la Torre, Carlos. “Hugo Chávez and the Diffusion of Bolivarianism.” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (November 10, 2017): 1271–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1307825>.

Estévez, Dolia. “Spy Central: Russian Influence in Mexico.” *The Watch*. April 21, 2024. <https://thewatch-journal.com/2025/04/21/spy-central-russian-influence-in-mexico/>.

Fernández, Ivette. “Solidaridad en Colombia Refrenda Apoyo a Cuba Contra el Bloqueo.” *Prensa Latina*, September 30, 2024. <https://publica.prensa-latina.cu/pub/solidaridad-en-colombia-refrenda-apoyo-a-cuba-contra-el-bloqueo>.

Gerschewski, Johannes. “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Cooptation in Autocratic Regimes.” *Democratization* 20 (2013): 13–38.

Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C. “Cuba en América Latina: La Influencia Persistente.” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), December 14, 2024. <https://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/cuba-en-america-latina-la-influencia-persistente/>.

Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C. “Cuba en Latinoamérica, Paradoja y Realidad de la Influencia Autoritaria.” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), October 10, 2024. <http://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/cuba-en-latinoamerica-paradoja-y-realidad-de-la-influencia-autoritaria/>.

Gobierno y Análisis Político A.C. “México Exporta a Cuba No Solo Petróleo, También Apoyo Académico.” GAPAC - Gobierno y Análisis Político AC (blog), May 17, 2024. <http://gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org/mexico-exporta-a-cuba-no-solo-petroleo-tambien-apoyo-academico/>.

Grundberger, Sebastian. *The Pink Galaxy: How the Foro de São Paulo, the Grupo de Puebla, and Their International Allies Undermine Democracy in Latin America*. Montevideo: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2024.

Herbst, John E., and Jason Marczak. “Russia’s Intervention in Venezuela: What’s at Stake?” Atlantic Council, September 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Russia-Venezuela-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

Infobae. “Russia Adds Another Base in Venezuela: It Will Open a Military Helicopter Maintenance Center.” Infobae, April 2, 2019, Venezuela and Americas section. <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/04/02/rusia-suma-otra-base-en-venezuela-abrira-un-centro-de-mantenimiento-de-helicopteros-militares/>.

Infobae. “Russian Warships Depart Venezuela After Four Days of Technical-Military Cooperation Between Caracas and Moscow.” Infobae, July 7, 2024, Venezuela and Americas section. <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/07/buques-militares-rusos-abandonaron-venezuela-despues-de-cuatro-dias-de-cooperacion-tecnico-militar-entre-caracas-y-moscu/>.

Kneuer, Marianne, and Thomas Demmelhuber. *Authoritarian Gravity Centers: A Cross-Regional Study of Authoritarian Promotion and Diffusion*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Lissardy, Gerardo. “Crisis de Venezuela: Qué Significa el Veto de Rusia y China a la Resolución de EE.UU. en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU.” BBC News Mundo, March 1, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47411480>.

Marcinek, Krystyna, and Eugeniu Han. *Russia’s Asymmetric Response to 21st Century Strategic Competition: Robotization of the Armed Forces*. RAND Corporation, March 13, 2023. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1233-5.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-5.html).

Martinez Meucci, Miguel Angel, and Armando Chaguaceda. “El Rebranding de la Revolución: Las Reinvencciones de la Extrema Izquierda en América Latina.” In *La Extrema Izquierda en Europa Occidental. Iliberalismo y Amenazas Para la Democracia*, edited by Eurne Uriarte and Ángel Rivero. Madrid: Tecnos, 2024.

Meléndez Quiñónez, Javier Ramón. “Influencia Chino-Rusa en Centroamérica.” Fundación Naumann, May 31, 2024. <https://www.freiheit.org/es/central-america/influencia-chino-rusa-en-centroamerica>.

Pelcastre, Julieta. “Russia Backs the Ortega-Murillo Regime in Repressing Its People.” *Diálogo Américas* (blog), July 15, 2024. <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/ortega-murillo-regime-represses-its-people-with-russias-backing/>.

Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva. “Nicaragua and Russia Vote Together at the United Nations.” September 19, 2024. [https://geneva.mid.ru/en/activities/news/19-09-2024\\_nicaragua-un\\_57d04a57670b3c38fb3346cef4bc97f4/](https://geneva.mid.ru/en/activities/news/19-09-2024_nicaragua-un_57d04a57670b3c38fb3346cef4bc97f4/).

PSUV. “Rusia Señala a la OEA Como Responsable de la Violencia en Venezuela.” PSUV, April 29, 2017. <http://www.psuv.org.ve/temas/noticias/vladimir-putin-oea-venezuela-terrorismo-injerencia-ciberespacio/#.WQTtjkXhDIU>.

Rid, Thomas. *Desinformación y guerra política: Historia de un siglo de falsificaciones y engaños*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2021.

Salvia, Gabriel C. “Las Sillas del Consejo, Autoritarismos y Democracias en la Evolución de la Integración del Órgano de DDHH de la ONU.” CADAL, December 10, 2020. <https://www.cadal.org/publicaciones/informes/?id=13365>.

Santos, César Eduardo. “Revisiting the Russian Threat in Central America.” *Diálogo Américas* (blog), October 9, 2024. <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/revisiting-the-russian-threat-in-central-america/>.

SputnikPro / InteRussia. “La agencia de noticias y radio Sputnik firmaron un acuerdo de cooperación con los portales de internet Ahora San Juan de Argentina y El Soberano de México.” December 15, 2022. <https://xn--c1acbl2abdlkab1og.xn--p1ai/20221215/366327.html>

Stoner, Kathryn. “The Putin Myth.” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023): 5–18. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0020>.

Stoner, Kathryn. “The Putin Myth.” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023): 5–18. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0020>.

The Watch Journal. “Mexico Targeted by Russian Information Operations after Ukraine Invasion.” August 12, 2024. <https://thewatch-journal.com/2024/08/12/mexico-targeted-by-russian-information-operations-after-ukraine-invasion/>.

Ventas, Leire. “The Enigmatic Satellite Station Russia Installed in Nicaragua to ‘Combat Drug Trafficking’ and That Alarms the United States.” BBC News Mundo, June 23, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40352903>.

Vladimirov, Martin, and Daria Osipova. “Global Reach: The Kremlin Playbook in Latin America.” Center for the Study of Democracy, September 2024. <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/global-reach/>.

Walker, Christopher. “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9–23.

Weyland, Kurt. 2017. “Autocratic Diffusion and Cooperation: The Impact of Interests vs. Ideology.” *Democratization* 24 (7): 1235–52. doi:10.1080/13510347.2017.1307823.



## **4Métrica**

 @Lab4Metrica

[www.4metrica.org](http://www.4metrica.org)

## **GAPAC**

 Gobierno y Análisis Político AC

 @GobAPAC

 gapac\_ac

 [info@gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org](mailto:info@gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org)

[www.gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org](http://www.gobiernoyanalisispolitico.org)