



Illiberal Narratives in Latin America: Russian and Allied Media as Vehicles of Autocratic Cooperation

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Abstract

Whether being discussed in the media, by intellectuals, or among political elites, illiberal narratives enjoy a significant presence and impact in Russia and Latin America alike. As a result of the conflict between Russia and the West over the invasion of Ukraine, the role of Russian media as a source of disinformation for the Latin American population has drawn attention. The presence of these mass media allows the Kremlin to question the democratic model in place in most of Latin America and defend the official positions of the Russian government while aligning itself with illiberal forces on the regional political spectrum—especially on the radical left.

Keywords: Illiberal narratives, Russia, Latin America, disinformation

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We are living through the dark hours of a dispute that opposes two different logics of power organization: democracy and autocracy—although we should acknowledge the nuances that hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes add to the debate.¹ Democratic regimes feature the distribution of power among institutions, are open to competition between different groups and agendas, and, in their contemporary version, incorporate (without being reduced to) the constitutive elements of liberal ideology. By contrast, autocratic regimes are characterized by the concentration of power with an individual or elite that monopolizes the government and dominates subordinates; they challenge the ideological and axiological,² as well as the design and functioning of their institutions.³ Thus, we have two political polarities on which various ideological and cultural positions intersect, as well as complex regimes with intertwined practices associated with democracy with specific authoritarian traits.

There is an ongoing debate between democracy and autocracy. In this context, global autocracies (China and Russia) are penetrating different regions of the world with their illiberal ideologies and disinformation agendas, seeking to erode democracy. In Latin America, a deeply rooted confluence⁴ of ideas, values, and practical agendas opposed to liberal democracy is gaining strength. The region is suffering from a growing wave of governments from the radical left (Maduro, Ortega, Díaz Canel) and from the right (Bolsonaro, Bukele) that have clear authoritarian and illiberal features.

The consolidation of the illiberal axis, which is part of the identity of the anti-Western movement, requires a broad dissemination apparatus. This, as González and Chaguaceda point out, implies not only diplomatic initiative (soft power), but also the activation of all the necessary propaganda mechanisms.⁵ The goal is not to defeat the adversary's narrative, but rather to cause confusion and sow doubt that democracy is the optimal form of political organization,⁶ thereby challenging the United States' leadership in the region.⁷

To that end, autocratic ruling elites deploy a realpolitik strategy that seeks to maximize national security as they understand it. The means they employ are not limited to tangible resources—whether financial, military, or technological. Rather, the political warfare approach, which supports autocratic regimes' projection of *sharp power*,⁸ involves constructing and disseminating ideas, symbols, and messages that can influence perceptions and behaviors. This is especially impactful in open societies, where the free flow of ideas and information can shape public opinion, which in turn has the potential to determine—and modify—the attitudes and objectives of the target government. This article aims to analyze the discursive and ideological synergies between Russian and Venezuelan media as propaganda and disinformation mechanisms in a framework of autocratic cooperation.

1 We thank the Government and Political Analysis (GAPAC) research team and to political scientist Carlos Torrealba y Daniel Calderón for their support, information, and observations in preparing this work, where we develop an approach initiated in previous works.

2 Stephen Holmes, "The Antiliberal Idea," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andrés Sajo, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2022).

3 Nenad Dimitrijevic, "Illiberal Regime Types," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andrés Sajo, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2022).

4 Roberto Gargarella, "Latin America Breathing: Liberalism and Illiberalism, Once and Again," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andrés Sajo, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2022).

5 Claudia González Marrero and Armando Chaguaceda, "El Poder de Rusia en Latinoamérica," *Diálogo Político*, February 4, 2022, <https://dialogopolitico.org/documentos/dp-enfoque/dpenfoque-rusia-en-latinoamerica/>.

6 Brian Fonseca, "Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America," *Global Americans*, August 7, 2018, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2018/08/russian-deceptive-propaganda-growing-fast-in-latin-america/>.

7 Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, "Rusia en América Latina: Repercusiones Para España," Real Instituto Elcano, March 28, 2019, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documento-de-trabajo/rusia-en-america-latina-repercusiones-para-espana/>, p. 6.

8 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence," *Foreign Affairs* (November 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

Understanding the Context, Understanding the Problem

Latin America is a melting pot of identities, processes, and socioeconomic and political structures. Four decades after democratic transitions began, the region has witnessed progress, stagnation, and—more recently—setbacks.⁹ Even though, formally speaking, the region's states subscribe to a majoritarian framework of democratic order and the validity of the rule of law, the region is in fact a kaleidoscope of regime types and state capacities.¹⁰

In countries such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay, we find highly democratic regimes combined with adequate levels of state capacity and openness to civic participation, advocacy, and mobilization. Brazil is a nation where a democratic political system—with high fragmentation and a strong balance of power—coexisted with a right-wing populist government, with variable levels of state capacity and prevalence, coinciding with a broad civic space and composed of numerous civil society actors. Mexico represents a case of a populist leftist government where the moderate openness of the political regime is combined with variable levels of state capacity and growing but still limited social mobilization. Meanwhile, the rest of the countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and the Andean zone have fragile democracies featuring institutions with low capacity to deal with emergency health situations, as well as formally open civic spaces, but with systematic and variable violations of civil rights. The autocratic alliance of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela shelters autocratic regimes with varying levels of state capacity (high in repression, low in provision) and limited social mobilization within a repressive environment of civic space rights. Haiti, a failed state, has almost no state capacity, coupled with moderate levels of openness and social mobilization.¹¹

While during the so-called “shift to the left” (1998-2018) the region experienced an increase in public spending and an improvement in the living conditions of millions of people across several countries, the subsequent end of the commodities boom—which resulted in economic recession and the adoption, by various governments, of adjustment and indebtedness policies—contributed to the current situation of economic stagnation and social anger. This discontent fueled the deterioration of democratic institutional frameworks that do not effectively channel citizens' demands and seem to be at the origin of the popular mobilizations that took place in various countries in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the processes of impoverishment and autocratization, as well as compounding the state's inability to respond effectively and legitimately to demands and uphold citizens' rights.¹² All of this has created fertile ground for the spread of illiberal ideologies.

Nevertheless, this has been driven not only by diminishing results for the economic, social, and political structures, but also by mutations in the attitudes of specific sectors of the citizenry and regional elites. Political support for democracy has declined systematically in Latin America over the last decade. An authoritarian political culture, inherited from the colonial period,¹³ survives, revealing long-term disaffection from the democratic and liberal models beyond the confluence of both models. If we analyze the evolution of citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy, we find that political support for democracy depends on the (procedural and performance) reality of these regimes in unequal Latin American societies.

9 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (London: Penguin Books, 2019); Yanina Welp, *The Will of the People: Populism and Citizen Participation in Latin America* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

10 Sebastian L. Mazzuca and Gerardo L. Munck, *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

11 Varieties of Democracy, “Autocratization Changing Nature?” V-Dem Institute, March 2022, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/19/dr_2022_ipxOPLP.pdf.

12 Maria Isabel Puerta Riera, “Democratic Backsliding and Autocratization,” GAPAC, February 15, 2021, <https://www.gobiernoyanalispolitico.org/post/democratic-backsliding-and-autocratization>.

13 Gargarella, “Latin America Breathing.”

Public opinion polls¹⁴ reveal not only fair criticism of liberal deficits, but also a specific commitment to non-democratic modes of governance.¹⁵ The regional intelligentsia is selectively blind when it comes to vernacular authoritarianism: the three countries where the exercise of all civic rights is most limited—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—do not receive as much attention from these intellectual circles. This reveals the weight, within this influential segment of the middle classes, of radical leftist positions mostly critical of the liberal order.¹⁶ The underlying problem is a phylotyrannical bias that was non-existent thirty years ago, when most of the collapsing (right-wing) dictatorships received unequivocal condemnation from the enlightened (academic and intellectual) circles that embraced democratic transitions.

Due to its impact on public life, the most politically relevant contradiction within the current Latin American academe is the one that takes sides with two opposing ways of conceiving power, based respectively on the recognition or denial of popular sovereignty and human rights: democracy versus autocracy. In both their conservative¹⁷ and radical left¹⁸ forms, autocratic options (as well as hybrid regimes and populist governments) share a liberal substratum. Thus, the distinctions between left and right, defined by their respective value systems and public policy priorities, can be processed in a conditional but reasonable way in the institutions and processes of our imperfect democracies.

The Russian Presence in Latin America

In this context, the links between Russia and Latin America, and especially Venezuela, have strengthened since the United States and other Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014 following the latter's annexation of Crimea and the confrontation between the Ukrainian military forces and pro-Russian separatists in the eastern part of the country (before the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion). Early in the government of Hugo Chávez, Venezuela became a reliable partner of Vladimir Putin. What was in principle a transactional relationship became a strategic alliance in the Russian fight against the United States.¹⁹ One area where the relationship has been not only consistent, but also broad due to its extent in the region has been the Russian supply of military weapons and technical assistance to Latin American countries, including Venezuela and Brazil. This has contributed substantially to the survival of the crisis-stricken Chavista regime since the oil price fell in 2015.²⁰

Over time, Russian-Venezuelan relations have not merely diversified, but also—as we can see from an analysis of the different spheres where illiberal synergies operate—deepened, causing the United States to consider it necessary to approach Venezuela to counteract the consequences of the oil sanctions imposed on Russia after it invaded Ukraine in February 2022. In this sense, and given the Biden administration's criticism of oil sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, it can also be seen as an attempt to reduce the capacity

14 Richard Wike, Alexandra Castillo, and Laura Silver, "Many across the Globe Are Dissatisfied with How Democracy Is Working," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, July 23, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>.

15 "Global Democracy Weakens in 2022," International IDEA, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/global-democracy-weakens-2022>.

16 Michael C. Behrent, "Left and New Left Critiques of Liberalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andrés Sajo, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2022).

17 Andy Hamilton, "Conservatism as Illiberalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andrés Sajo, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2022).

18 Behrent, "Left and New Left Critiques of Liberalism."

19 Joshua Chang, "Arms Sales, Mercenaries, and Strategic Bombers: Moscow's Military Footprint in Venezuela," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, November 24, 2019, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2019/11/26/arms-sales-mercenaries-and-strategic-bombers-moscows-military-footprint-in-venezuela/>.

20 Zachery Abunemeh and Vasabjit Banerjee, "How External Actors Have Worsened Venezuela's Long Crisis," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, November 12, 2019, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2019/06/24/how-external-actors-have-worsened/>.

for Russian influence in Latin America to provoke a regional geopolitical readjustment, considering that military ties are not the only strategic asset.

The information universe is undoubtedly one of the spaces where Russian influence has had decisive consequences for the region. The penetration of the information environment has led to a display of Russian *sharp power* in coordination with allied governments and regional anti-Western organizations, academic and intellectual networks affiliated with the anti-imperialist axis as an expression of the intercontinental ideological apparatus. The anti-West axis is conceived as a multipolar alternative to the unipolar Western order, and it is oriented toward the goal of consolidating a new geopolitical hegemony.

In light of these objectives, the Russian State has leveraged the internet and new global media (*Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, and others) to exert its *sharp power* over Western nations, especially disaffected groups and those on the political extremes (both the right and the left). At the same time, it cooperates with autocratic allies to promote agendas and narratives in line with the common interests of these autocrats and the Kremlin.²¹ In Latin America, where resentment of the United States and radical ideas hold sway across the ideological spectrum, the Russian state has called the post-Cold War democratic consensus into question using a network of its own media and allies, which we analyze below.

The Russian Media and Its Allies

As an investigation by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)²² has pointed out, winning over Latin American audiences—both from Bolivarian governments and from essential countries such as Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia—is among Russia's strategic goals in the media sphere. Indeed, Mexico is among the countries with the highest rates of audience growth, according to an Ipsos study²³ commissioned by RT. According to the DFRLab, it is significant that 50% of the traffic on the RT en Español website has been registered in the abovementioned countries; it reflects the Russian media's influence in a market where other allies, such as Telesur, compete, but where CNN, Voice of America, and the BBC, among other international media outlets, do not register the same penetration. Russian media outlets have become a familiar source of information for the Latin American population.²⁴ Their sensationalism allows them to capture the attention of broad masses and, like the great Western news networks, conduct mass communication in real time.

It is vital to consider the impact of market segmentation by medium, as Latin American audiences are distributed across different social networks: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Additionally, they have the alternative channels of Telegram and WhatsApp as well as their proper web pages. This gives us an idea of the breadth of the influence strategy of the Russian official media network in those countries subject to constant informational influence directed from the Kremlin.

Two characteristics contribute to the financial opacity of the Russian media: the absence of budgets or fiscal years in public view and the overlaps in its vast media network, with those in leadership distributed among the different information apparatuses. This is apparent in the media structure financed by the Kremlin through the *Rossiya Segodnya* parent company, which shares leadership with RT, and where *Sputnik* is also found, among other channels and news services.

21 Rachel Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner).

22 DFRLAB, "A Glimpse into RT's Latin American Audience," Medium, August 7, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfriab/a-glimpse-into-rts-latin-american-audience-487d52bed507>.

23 "RT Weekly TV Audience Grows by More than a Third over 2 years; Now 100MN—IPSONS," *RT*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/ipsos-market-research-rt/>.

24 Vladimir Rouvinski, "The Misleading Truths of Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America," *Global Security Review* 2 (2022).

Russia Today

Russian media penetration in Latin America can be seen as an efficient tool for positioning the Kremlin's narrative, given the experience of its leading media outlet, *Russia Today* (RT).

RT is an international news channel financed by the Russian Federation. It operates from Moscow and defines itself as an autonomous non-profit organization²⁵ that was the first online media in the world, ahead of more traditional media outlets such as the BBC, Voice of America, and CNN. In an era when information and disinformation compete in the same spaces and under equal conditions, this self-definition is not a minor fact. According to the United States Department of State,²⁶ Russian government-funded media outlets disseminate (dis)information via a propaganda ecosystem comprised of five pillars: 1) official communications; 2) global positioning of State-financed messaging; 3) cultivation of intermediate sources; 4) use of social networks as weapons; and 5) cyber disinformation.

The channel RT en Español was created to disseminate news to the Spanish-speaking market. The subsidiary began operations in 2009, reaching a broad audience in Latin America. One of the goals of this outlet is to offer another interpretation of the facts. Even though the channel claims to focus on highlighting less-covered news, it is in fact a reframing operation. On its website, the channel lists the names of its team of thirty journalists and correspondents,²⁷ among which those sent to such countries as Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, the US, Venezuela, and Argentina stand out.

The network's digital penetration and the multiplicity of platforms on which it operates have contributed to its rise. According to its own figures, in 2020, RT's videos received 10 billion views on YouTube. However, despite its claims to take an impartial position, the fact that it is officially financed by the Russian regime leaves little doubt as to the nature of the channel's coverage. As reported by *Meduza*,²⁸ RT tops the list of media funded by the federal government, with a budget of \$451,968,748 for 2022. In the case of RT America,²⁹ the network's subsidiary in the United States, the amount of Russian government funding is known (\$141,753,983 since 2016)³⁰ due to the demands of the country's Department of Justice,³¹ whereas the Latin American states have less stringent reporting requirements.

Sputnik Mundo

The Sputnik Mundo news agency³² is the Russian version of an international news agency with correspondents. It works in the most important cities, and, in addition to its presence on multiple platforms, it also has a radio station. The agency operates from Moscow, with correspondents in places as diverse as Cairo, Montevideo, Beijing, and Washington. The agency's goal is to disseminate content on political, economic, and social issues facing Russia and the world. The agency was created in 2014 from the merger of the Russian

25 See RT, "About Us," last accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/contact-info/>.

26 Global Engagement Center, "Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," US Department of State, January 20, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/report-rt-and-sputniks-role-in-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/>.

27 "Equipo de RT," *RT Actualidad*, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://actualidad.rt.com/acercia/equipo>.

28 "RT ostalsia liderom po ob'emam gosfinansirovaniia sredi SMI. V 2022 godu kanal poluchit pochti 29 milliardov rublei," *Meduza*, December 23, 2021, <https://meduza.io/news/2021/12/23/rt-ostalsya-liderom-po-ob-emam-gosfinansirovaniya-sredi-smi-v-2022-godu-kanal-poluchit-pochti-29-milliardov-rublej>.

29 Elena Postnikova, "Agent of Influence: Should Russia's RT Register as a Foreign Agent?" Atlantic Council, September 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/RT_Foreign_Agent_web_0831.pdf.

30 "Foreign Lobby Watch," Open Secrets, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara/registrants>.

31 Mike Eckel, "RT America Received More Than \$100 Million In Russian Government Funding Since 2017, Filings Show," *RFE/RL*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-america-funding/31427870.html>.

32 "Quienes Somos," Sputnik Mundo, accessed April 11, 2023, https://sputniknews.lat/docs/quienes_somos.html.

Information Agency Novosti (*RIA Novosti*) and the *Voice of Russia* radio station, both part of the media conglomerate operated by the state-owned company *Rossiya Segodnya*.

As with RT, the details of Sputnik Mundo's operating funds are opaque. In the absence of publicly available, reliable information indicating the origin of the budget and organizational structures, it is necessary to resort to indirect and incomplete sources to reconstruct its financial framework. The only site that indicates a budget for Sputnik Mundo is Wikipedia. It links it to the parent organization *Rossiya Segodnya*,³³ which—according to the aforementioned State Department report³⁴—is partially responsible for its financing but does not make it public.

Ruptly

Another outlet within the ecosystem of Russian state-funded media is Ruptly, a video news agency described as a sister to RT. It is presented in various formats and platforms (television, digital website, and social networks). It was founded in 2013 by ANO TV Novosti, the Russian state television agency,³⁵ to operate independently and commercially, offering paid subscription services to individuals and businesses.

According to RT, the Ruptly agency, based in Germany, launched its Spanish version in 2019.³⁶ It has 22 offices worldwide and makes its content available to television networks and digital media. It offers broadcasting services, live positions, and multi-camera studios in cities such as London, Paris, New York, and Washington. Its mission is to “becoming a competitive alternative to the status quo news agencies by delivering clients exclusive high impact and viral video, a varied selection of daily live feeds, and a full range of broadcast services and a customized personal service.”³⁷ Its half-brothers are RTD, RT, RT America, RT en Español, *Rusiya Al-Yaum*, and RT UK.

Telesur

From the other direction, we must address the regional-based illiberal-driven media that act as an autocratic Latin American counterpart to the Russian media ecosystem. Here, the television network *Telesur*³⁸ stands out. The product of an initiative led by Venezuela, it was founded in 2005³⁹ during the presidency of Hugo Chávez, in alliance with the governments of Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil as founding members (later joined by Bolivia). It is a 24-hour news channel headquartered in Caracas that seeks to introduce diversity to the ecosystem of cable news channels by providing a Latin American vision of the most relevant news.

However, one of its founders, Aram Aharonian, has pointed out that *Telesur* has failed to become more than a Venezuelan channel.⁴⁰ Although there is no information available on its number of existing collaborators and correspondents, in a video celebrating its tenth

33 “The History of *Rossiya Segodnya* International Media Group Stretches back 80 Years,” *Rossiya Segodnya*, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://rossiyasegodnya.com/history/>.

34 Global Engagement Center, “Kremlin-Funded Media.”

35 “About Ruptly,” Ruptly, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/about-ruptly>.

36 “Ruptly lanza su nueva plataforma en español,” *Sputnik Mundo*, July 24, 2019, <https://sputniknews.lat/20190724/ruptly-lanza-su-nueva-plataforma-en-espanol-1088138688.html>.

37 “About Ruptly,” Ruptly, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/about-ruptly>.

38 “Historia,” *telesur.tv.net*, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.telesur.tv.net/pages/sobrenosotros.html>.

39 Indira A. R. Lakshmana, “Channeling His Energies: Venezuelans Riveted by President’s TV Show,” *Boston.com*, July 27, 2005, http://archive.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2005/07/27/channeling_his_energies/.

40 “Aram Aharonian: ‘Telesur no logró ser latinoamericano, sigue siendo venezolano,’” *La Gaceta*, July 27, 2014, <http://www.lagaceta.com.ar/nota/601045/television/aram-aharonian-telesur-no-logro-ser-latinoamericano-sigue-siendo-venezolano.html>.

anniversary⁴¹ in 2015, the channel highlighted the presence of collaborators in 32 countries in Latin America, Europe, and Africa, including emphasizing the importance of presence in and collaboration with Russia.

Since its inception, Telesur has aspired to compete with CNN or the BBC, seeking to provide balance in the media against what they have characterized as an imperialist monopoly. However, the formation of the network reflects an ideological bias that replicates the North/South or Capitalism/Socialism debate, in which a news approach free of ideological antagonism is not identified. The channel is conceived as a vehicle for promoting a narrative allied to the dominant political axis in the coalition of countries that support it. This was clearly seen with the withdrawal of Argentina and Uruguay as sponsors once Mauricio Macri and Luis Lacalle Pou won their respective presidential elections.

Telesur depends financially on the Venezuelan government, which has always been the majority shareholder. At first, Venezuela had a 51% stake, with the remaining 49% covered by contributions from the other member countries: Argentina (20%); Cuba (14%); Uruguay (10%), and later Bolivia (5%). In its beginnings, the start-up investment was in the order of \$12.5 million USD, according to official sources. Subsequently, Argentina (2016)⁴², Ecuador (2018),⁴³ and Uruguay (2020)⁴⁴ stopped contributing to its financing. Venezuela's contributions have since come to represent 70% of the network's budget.

We have not been able to find an official record of financial balances to verify subsequent movements in the composition of Telesur's shareholders. The only two references to the annual budget correspond to the ministerial budget of the entity to which the outlet is ascribed, the Venezuelan Ministry for Information and Communication, for 5,200,000,000 bolivares in 2016, about \$7.8 million USD approximately.

Correo del Orinoco

Focused on the Venezuelan national public, *Correo del Orinoco* is a Venezuelan newspaper founded in 2009. It forms part of the public (state) media system, which is made up of 13 television channels, 5 radio stations, 9 newspapers, and a news agency. With an estimated print run of 50,000 copies and a website (www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve), *Correo del Orinoco* began as a project of President Hugo Chávez intended to counteract traditional media (*El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *Últimas Noticias*) with editorial lines critical of the government, and has since captured much of national news consumption.

Below, we present some data on the origin and outreach of these Russian and Venezuelan media outlets, which may help us to assess their potential impact.

41 "teleSUR incrementa su red de corresponsales en el mundo," Daily Motion video, 2:29, posted by "teleSUR tv," 2015, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x225m7k>.

42 Carlos E. Cué, "Argentina sale de Telesur, la cadena latinoamericana creada por Chávez," *El País*, March 28, 2016, https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/03/28/argentina/1459194299_288241.html.

43 "Ecuador deja de financiar a cadena venezolana Telesur," *Associated Press*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/ecuador-suspende-financiamiento-telesur-cadena-venezolana-tv/4305928.html>.

44 Nicolas Chamorro, "Cancillería anunció que Uruguay deja de integrar Telesur y Banco del Sur," *Radio Monte Carlo*, March 13, 2020, https://www.radiomontecarlo.com.uy/articulos/articulos_masinfo.php?secc=articulos&id=63922&path=0.2308.

Table 1. Number of followers on social networks of selected media

Year Established	Medium/ Foundation	Headquarters	Followers on Twitter	Followers on Facebook	Followers on YouTube
2009	RT in Spanish	Moscow, Russia	3,500,000	18,074,210	5,800,000
2012	Ruptly	Berlin Germany	117,700	-	2,200,000
2014	Sputnik Mundo	Moscow, Russia	157,800	629,467	145,100
2005	Telesur	Caracas, Venezuela	2,000,000	2,128,441	1,600,000
2009	Correo del Orinoco	Caracas Venezuela	6433	296,549	2030

Source: HypeAuditor, 2022.

For these media outlets, ratings and public penetration are less important than getting their content picked up by other, more reliable platforms. As the U.S. State Department puts it, the Russian disinformation media ecosystem is an information-laundering machine.⁴⁵ This laundering aims to legitimize the Russian media’s manipulations and thus fuel mistrust of democratic institutions.

Russian influence in the regional communication apparatus is another expression of the political integration between the Vladimir Putin regime and its allies in Latin America. The growth strategy of the informative bureaucratic apparatus is expressed in two aspects:

1. Operational structure: The incursion of Russian media in Spanish—such as RT, Sputnik Mundo, its services such as Ruptly, and the extinct Voice of Russia in Spanish, have increased the effort to penetrate and influence regional public opinion.

These media outlets are (at least in theory) dedicated to promoting the objectives of the multipolar movement, seeking not only the positioning of an alternative regional leadership, but also—and more fundamentally—to subvert the Western democratic order by sowing distrust in democracy as a democratic model⁴⁶ and criticizing the U.S. government and its allies in the West as an example of democratic decline through disqualification.

2. Disinformation apparatus: These media seek not only to generate opinion frames, but also to subvert the political order through disinformation. This dual mission translates into interference and obstacles to the coordination of support in the strategic issues of the region.⁴⁷

45 Global Engagement Center, “RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem,” US Department of State, January 20, 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf.

46 Fonseca, “Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America;” González Marrero and Chaguaceda, “El Poder de Rusia en Latinoamérica.”

47 Ryan C. Berg, “What Does Russia’s War in Ukraine Mean for Latin America and the Caribbean?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 17, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

In 2018, Global Americans monitored four media outlets during the second half of the year, two Russian (*RT* and *Sputnik*) and two Chinese (*Xinhua* and *People's Daily Online*). They found that “disinformation efforts coming from Russian state media are more aggressive than those from China.”⁴⁸

As Fonseca points out, the purpose of the Russian outlets’ disinformation strategy is to promote mistrust in the media and democratic institutions to reduce the space of influence of Western democracies.⁴⁹ The Russian regime has been engaged in this effort for years: as early as 2013, Latin America represented the second-greatest area of RT influence after Islamic countries.⁵⁰

The Russia-led regional system of communicational influence represents an additional field of confrontation between Russia and the West that requires more attention because it is much more effective at generating distrust in democracy, especially in Western democracy, without a counter message. This strategy has proven to be successful, posing a real challenge for Latin America’s democratic forces precisely when liberal democracy is going through its worst moment.

Media-Political Confluences

To explain how Russian influence is projected in Latin America, it is necessary to identify in the relevant mass media synergies between the Kremlin and its autocratic allies in the region on such issues as democracy, human rights, and international relations. Elements such as sovereignty, loyalty, and resistance stand out. This is in line with the illiberal sovereigntist emphasis, which delegates the incarnation of the nation to the State—and its highest authorities—above any other consideration.⁵¹

However, it is also important to consider the complexities of a region that has sought change through radical political alternatives (from opposing ideologies) that are not very different from the current illiberal experiences undermining Western democracies. The alliances that China and Russia have built throughout Latin America share the common denominator of being with regimes that have substantially diminished democratic institutions in societies that have a long history of struggling to overcome authoritarianism. The fertile ground China and Russia have found in weakened democracies offers an opportunity to expand the illiberal axis they represent.⁵²

Investigating this influence is a complex issue. After all, the behavior of autocratic regimes is characterized by opacity, making it difficult to identify their projects’ financing, objectives, and political links. Hence, the sources of information used to collect the data in this text were diverse, fragmented, and compiled after extensive efforts by the authors and the team that supported us. Among Russian and Venezuelan

48 Alessia Noboa and Sofía Mateu-Gelabert, “Tácticas de Desinformación de Medios Estatales de Rusia y China,” *Global Americans*, July 10, 2020, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2019/06/tacticas-de-desinformacion-de-medios-estatales-de-rusia-y-china/#>.

49 Fonseca, “Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America.”

50 Josep Maria de Sagarra Ángel and Chimo Soler Herreros, “El español en la Federación de Rusia: factor determinante en las relaciones con los países hispanohablantes,” *Iberoamerica* 2 (2014): 93–118, 106.

51 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>; Andrei Kolesnikov, “Scientific Putinism: Shaping Official Ideology in Russia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 21, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88451>.

52 Thomas J. Main, *The Rise of Illiberalism*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; Esteban Ponce de León and Daniel Suárez Pérez, “Digital Autocracy: Maduro’s Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment,” *Atlantic Council*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/digital-autocracy/>; Chaguaceda Noriega, A., & Boersner Herrera, A. (2022, August 18). *Russia in Latin America: The illiberal confluence: LSE Latin America and Caribbean*. LSE Latin America and Caribbean blog. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2022/07/28/russia-in-latin-america-the-illiberal-confluence/>.

media and institutions, opacity is sometimes the norm; in other cases, it is possible to count—albeit with some reservations—on data on their resources and objectives.

To support the thesis of this article, with the assistance of the GAPAC team and the experts Carlos Torrealba and Daniel Calderón, we identified the illiberal narratives present in the news coverage and editorials of four media outlets (*Russia Today*, *Sputnik News*, *Telesur* and *Correo del Orinoco*) in 2018–2020 using structural discourse and frame analysis, following the combination of traditional content analysis with frame structures described by Johnston.⁵³ The review focused on four terms, two that allude to more general frameworks and processes (humanitarian crisis, Venezuelan conflict) and two that relate to more specific political phenomena (democracy in Venezuela, human rights in Venezuela). Here, we discuss in brief the results of this analysis.

It may be possible to understand the media-political confluence of the Russian narrative in Latin America by taking its interaction with the Venezuelan authoritarian regime as a case study. Along with economic, military, diplomatic, and intelligence cooperation, Russia (a global autocratic power) and Venezuela (a Latin American autocratic regime) establish synergies concerning the defense and projection of their political worldview. Venezuela is positioned as the Russian gateway to the Latin American market and regional space economically, academically, culturally, and media-wise. For its part, Russia offers a diplomatic counterweight to the United States, against other democratic allies, and against the questioning and disapproval of the international community. The administration led first by Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and then by Nicolás Maduro (2013–present) has found an essential ally in Vladimir Putin. A sign of this has been the exchange between media and political spaces and a mutual “solidarity.”

First, the Russian media frequently call for loyalty to the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the exaltation of sovereignty in the face of “attacks” that seek to harm it. Likewise, the resistance of the autocratic regimes in the region to external threats is evident. Examples of the above are the following fragments of headlines: “loyalty, support, and commitment to the population and to the Bolivarian National Armed Forces” (*Telesur*); “how the Cuban government resisted pressure from the United States” and “self-determination of the peoples” (*RT*); and “defend the right to sovereignty” (*Correo del Orinoco*).

Second, the Russian media highlight the cooperation between autocratic actors (governments and the media), who share an illiberal vision of the national and global order.⁵⁴ For the Kremlin, it is essential to show that Venezuela is not alone in terms of international alliances. Along these lines, it is not surprising that the Russia-Venezuela alliance is a prominent theme of media content: “Russia supports the legitimate Government of Venezuela” (*RT*) and “Caracas is a strategic partner of Russia” (*Telesur*). Calls for dialogue, peace, and order—“peace and understanding among Venezuelans” (*RT*) and “peaceful solution to the crisis” (*Telesur*)—also appear repeatedly in these media. This is reminiscent of how the Putin and Maduro regimes have used calls for dialogue (in Venezuela, Ukraine, Syria, etc.) to defuse resistance to their political agendas and achieve advantages within the framework of said processes.

Meanwhile, when addressing whether there is democracy in Venezuela, the Russian media are adamant that it does exist. This perspective aims to provide legitimacy to the Maduro government: “we are the country with the most vigorous democracy in Latin America” (*Correo del Orinoco*), “eight Russian politicians participated in international oversight of the parliamentary elections” (*Telesur*), and “Venezuela

53 Hank Johnston, “Verification and Proof in Frame and Discourse Analysis,” in *Methods of Social Movement Research* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 62–91.

54 Kurt Weyland, “Autocratic Diffusion and Cooperation: The Impact of Interests vs. Ideology,” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (December 2017): 1235–1252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1307823>.

enjoys a vigorous popular democracy” (*Sputnik News*). Here the discussion refers to the ways of conceiving democracy by populist governments and autocratic regimes, united in rejecting the institutions, mechanisms, values and principles of a polyarchy. At this point, the media-political cooperation between both regimes and autocratic narratives acquires another level of visibility, showing how shared illiberal goals and perspectives make them collaborate and share information and statements, without too much mediation.

In these media outlets, *hostile countries* are sanctioned, which is reflected in statements like “initiatives hostile to Venezuela, such as the creation of the Lima Group” (*RT*), “Organization of American States, the Lima Group and countries aligned with Washington’s foreign policy” (*Correo del Orinoco*) and “The US uses countries in the region to attack and destabilize institutions and democracy in that nation” (*Sputnik News*). As can be seen, adversaries are those governments or institutions that make up the liberal democratic stronghold in the region and that, in the case of the United States, hold global leadership.

Conclusions

The synergy between global autocracies and local illiberal governments amplifies the reach and presence of Russia and China in Latin America. The enormous human and material resources of the Chinese Communist Party—which include investments, credits, personnel training, and cultural propaganda—serve to leverage the agenda of the political elite of that country in the Latin American region, seducing not only its traditional allies, but also parties, businesspeople, and opinion-makers close to the liberal democratic orbit. Compared to other autocracies, Russia’s relatively more advanced and flexible *sharp power* tools have given the country an advantage in Latin America.

Although Russia has less of a direct presence in the Latin American academe than does China (Russian Houses of Culture are hardly comparable to Confucius Institutes), the illiberal ideological affinity concerning the official Russian narrative is significant and influential within public opinion. With the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian media have reinforced their status as a source of disinformation in Latin America. Today, we see “calculated ambiguity” (instead of clear condemnation or defense) on the attitudes of various governments, parties, and segments of the Latin American intelligentsia and population toward Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

Of course, in Latin America there are issues with democracy (history and development) that are not the result of Chinese or Russian influence. Still, the latter take advantage of cultural affinities, institutional similarities, and social sympathies useful for their agendas. The problem on the continent is not just global autocracies: Iran, Cuba, and illiberal networks of the right (libertarian) and the left (Bolivarian) are increasing their influence within Latin American societies and political systems.

This framework explains the convergence between Russia and several Latin American countries, which have experienced parallel processes of autocratization. Personalist illiberal regimes—such as those of Russia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua—have strengthened dialogue, collaboration, and mutual support throughout their political relations. Their practices converge on the progressive elimination of democratic institutions and actors (opposition parties, media, and civil society organizations). In parallel, these governments have ensured a strong state presence in the economy, from clientelism to neo-patrimonial relationships.

The illiberal factor appears to be a soft but highly effective ideology that permeates the discourses of the media, intellectuals, and think tanks close to the Kremlin’s objectives. As the renowned expert Victor Mijares has recently pointed out, due both to their value in projecting domestic hegemony and challenging the liberal global order and to their influence on elites and publics affected by Chavismo within

Latin America, these narratives—projected by related media and academies—enjoy considerable presence and impact in the current Venezuelan and regional panorama.⁵⁵

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian media ecosystem has hit new milestones as a source of disinformation for the Latin American population.⁵⁶

We cannot locate these countries' ideological synergies within the conventional parameters of the Cold War, but perceive possible points of contact and affordances between conservatism and Russian nationalism.⁵⁷ These visions echo discourses and agendas shared by political, media, and academic actors in the region, where illiberal, nationalist, and statist approaches, as well as those opposed to the open society and the democratic order, are widely represented.

The advance of Russia's strategic communications in Latin America has met with relatively little opposition.⁵⁸ One of the factors behind the success of these networks in Latin America is the public's lack of understanding of the nature of Moscow's interest in the regional informational space. Many Latin Americans perceive media such as *RT* or *Sputnik* as a simple expression of informational pluralism. In the Latin American context, there are few public debates about media pluralism, although perhaps the Ukraine war will somewhat change this situation.

We must reflect on what we do from past experience. Acting effectively in a world of highly fluid, changing, and complex political ideas and practices requires information, sophistication, creativity, and articulation—knowledge of the context and view of the adversary; insight to understand the best approaches to strengthen democratic resilience; creativity to find ways to review the good or bad practices of all sides; and *articulation* to act as a network and with a plan instead of as reactive and fragmented campaigns.

The political center—made up of liberals, social democrats, Christian democrats, new identities, and citizen movements, among other programmatic referents—must be strengthened and developed.

In terms of political media influence, it is necessary to improve the quality of TV programming, combining programs that provide critical analysis of the socioeconomic and political problems of interest to Latin American populations with attractive entertainment programs. It is also vital, given the deterioration of democratic institutions and the influence of disinformation, to promote examples of civic attitudes and intellectual approaches that reinforce democratic values and institutions. This requires creative advice from multidisciplinary teams and permanent monitoring of the people and their demands.

After all, if the accumulated problems facing Latin America's fragile democracies—social cohesion, sustainable and inclusive development, provision of public goods and services, transparency, and the rule of law—are not resolved, these democracies will always be vulnerable to the seduction of internal populism and the influence (soft or strong) of foreign autocracies.

55 Armando Chaguaceda, "'Soft Ideology' para la hegemonía: los nexos ruso-venezolanos," *HyperMedia* (magazine), October 22, 2021, <https://www.hypermediamagazine.com/dosieres-hm/rusia-en-latinoamerica/soft-ideology-nexos-ruso-venezolanos/>.

56 Esteban Ponce de León, "RT and Sputnik in Spanish Boosted by Russian Embassy Tweets and Suspicious Accounts," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), March 17, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/rt-and-sputnik-in-spanish-boosted-by-russian-embassy-tweets-and-suspicious-accounts-3a24ded7ef57>.

57 Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction"; Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov, "Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 4 (October 2021).

58 Rouvinski, "The Misleading Truths of Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America."