



From Counter-Hegemonic Dialogue to Illiberal Understanding: Russian-Latin American Relations (2000–2023)

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Abstract

Russia's return to Latin America since the 2000s now presents a mixed picture. Initially forged with a view to economic growth and trade diversification, the ties between Latin American countries and Russia have gradually become more political in nature, with public diplomacy in both emphasizing the rejection of liberalism and the West. Russia has thus been able to deploy a soft power strategy based on two pillars: its media of influence, which have been favorably received by "pink tide" governments, as well as the militant leftist networks in the Spanish-speaking world. In this article, I show that the counter-hegemonic dialogue between the various components of the Latin-American left and Russia can be described as "illiberal." First, it is entirely context-dependent and does not follow any political line underpinned by a common dogma. Second, it can be explained by an ideological framework largely inherited from the Soviet past that is present on the Latin American left and exploited by Russia today. Third, it operates through a collection of narratives that echo the main historical struggles of the Latin American left: anti-Americanism, anti-colonialism, and anti-liberalism.

Keywords: Russia; Latin America; illiberalism; counter hegemonic dialogue; "pink tide"

At the turn of the century, a decade after the brutal cessation of relations that followed the collapse of the USSR, the Latin American countries and Russia commenced a new cycle of bilateral relations. The newly globalized world and economic growth of emerging countries buoyed this dynamic. Yet the strength of Russo-Latin American relations has mostly been due not to opportunities for growth, but to a sometimes-violent questioning of the Western-led world order. Many works on the evolution of Russo-Latin American relations emphasize, for instance, the authoritarian nature of their respective regimes as a way of explaining the ties between the Kremlin and Latin American capitals.¹

However, the great diversity of contexts, approaches, and devices in and through which Russian bilateral and public diplomacy have been pursued in Latin America forces a qualification of the previous statement. If Russia has established privileged links with the countries of the Bolivarian axis, whose authoritarian turn is indisputable,² it has also been able to develop commercial, economic, and cultural links with such regional powers as Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. Moreover, the recent presidential elections in Brazil, which occurred amid heightened political tensions and societal polarization, show that the relationship to Russia is not a line of divide: Russian diplomacy finds itself supported by candidates as diverse as the far-right Jair Bolsonaro and the left-winger Lula da Silva. Likewise, Argentine president Alberto Fernández's declaration that he would make Argentina "the gateway to Russia in Latin America"—a statement that came two weeks before Russia's invasion—hardly transformed Argentina's democracy into an autocratic regime.

In order to conduct a more precise and granular analysis of the dialogue established between Latin American countries and Russia since 2000, I use Marlene Laruelle's theoretical framework for defining illiberalism.³ According to Laruelle, four major elements contribute to the idea, allowing it to occupy a new semantic niche that is better adapted to understanding the structural volatility of contemporary Russo-Latin American relations:

(1) Illiberalism must be understood as a thin global ideology, but one whose doctrinal and empirical character depends entirely on context.

(2) Illiberalism must be understood as being a relationship of tension with liberalism, situated in a specific context. It is interpreted as a rejection of liberalism by countries that have experienced it, from which experiences emerge elements of critique that constitute the background of alternative narratives to the liberal ideological matrix (meta-narratives).

(3) Illiberalism, contra liberal universalism, proposes a sovereigntist vision refocused on the value of the domestic and of identities, declined according to a palette of regimes of otherness (indigenous, regional, national in the sense of "nation" or of "people").

(4) As a global vector, illiberalism acts as a cohesive force for rejecting liberalism and has proliferated in different national and regional contexts around the world. The

1 Claudia Gonzalez Marrero and Armando Chaguaceda, "El poder de Rusia en Latinoamérica: Autocracia global, influencia regional," *DP enfoque* 7 (2022), <https://dialogopolitico.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/El-poder-de-Rusia-en-Latinoamerica.pdf>.

2 "Global Outlook: Democracy Index 2022," Economist Intelligence Unit, March 2, 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/global-outlook-democracy-index-2022/>.

3 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (May): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

circulation of narratives and images within hypermediated global societies promotes this confluence effect and produces a common political narrative. This narrative, which we call here a counter-hegemonic dialogue, projects an intention of solidarity between governments, media, opinion-makers, intellectuals, activists, etc., who for different reasons have severed ties with liberalism. This ensemble is united around a shared objective: to announce and promote the overcoming of liberalism as the ideological referent of the world order.

Russian-Latin American relations are rooted in the history of difficult relations between the southern and northern countries of the Western Hemisphere, especially during the Cold War. The intellectual construction of the Latin-American left during the Cold War and its rejection of American imperialism; the ideological background of the critique of liberal experiences in the 1990s; and the rise of the “pink tide” in the 2000s all contribute to explaining the relative effectiveness of the Kremlin’s influence operations and deployment of soft power in Latin America. Three components help illuminate this phenomenon: the weakness of the interdependencies between Russians and Latin Americans, in terms of economic exchanges and lasting cultural and political partnerships; the establishment of a real counter-hegemonic dialogue between Russia and several Latin American countries outside of any alliance or ideological alignment; and the weight of the Kremlin’s media influence on extreme-left opinion networks that embrace the political strains of the extreme right and are increasingly present in Latin American political culture.

Tensions between Liberalism and Illiberalism in Latin America

Latin America’s shift to the left can be interpreted as an expression of “regional postliberalism.” There are substantial differences between the policy programs and dogmatic lines of those leftist leaders who came to power in the early 2000s. All of them, however, began their leadership in the same way: by breaking—more or less clearly and definitively depending on the case—with the dominant economic discourses of the 1990s,⁴ often characterized by opponents of the liberal model in Latin America as the “Washington consensus.” While this rejection of the liberal model primarily entailed a critique of the socio-economic consequences of neoliberal structural adjustments, the liberal experience of Latin American countries embraced other areas of political life. I contend that three elements characterized this liberal moment: the transition to democracy that changed public institutions following the long tenures of military dictatorships; the imposition of structural adjustment measures that impacted public management and the functioning of markets; and the repositioning of Latin American countries in the global arena following the end of the Cold War.

The Liberal Context of Latin America in the 2000s

About a decade before the fall of the USSR, Latin America was beginning to chart its course toward “democracy” after years of military dictatorships and autocratic civilian regimes. The designers of these transition processes believed that the transition from authoritarianism to democracy depended, first and foremost, on the restoration of an institutional order that would allow for the organization of free elections.⁵ On the basis of this cornerstone, a second phase of transition—building

4 Camille Goirand, “Le gauches en Amérique Latine, avant-propos,” *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 12, no. 3 (2005): 267–282, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.123.0267>.

5 Georges Couffignal, “Crise, transformation et restructuration des systèmes de partis,” *Pouvoirs* 98, no. 3 (2001): 103–115, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pouv.098.0103>.

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a system of representation by rehabilitating or creating political parties—was envisaged. The political parties that existed at that time only had a weak militant base and social anchorage, having been banned or prevented during the period of military dictatorships. When the transition processes begin, these parties become major actors thanks to a legitimacy rooted in the influence of their leaders, who had gained their position as dissidents or as members of an economic elite.

In many cases, such as in Uruguay, Chile and Argentina, the transition to democracy was ensured by pacts between democratic leaders and members of the outgoing military regimes⁶. These compromises took two forms: either a gradual liberalization that would allow the regime's authorities to retain the essential levers of power; or a complete opening-up that would lead to a full transition to a democratic state governed by the rule of law, yet without former elites being held accountable for the crimes and serious human rights abuses they had committed.⁷ Even though the details of both transition plans varied depending on the country, the main consequence was the exclusion of large sectors of civil society from the choices that would define the terms of the future social contract.

This lack of a structural link between the new elites responsible for organizing emerging democracies and these democracies' citizens carried the seeds of the crisis of representation that hit several Latin American countries in the early 2000s. Despite the establishment of a formal electoral game whose rules were relatively respected, the glaring lack of political responses to the multiple social demands generated by liberalization eventually caused the collapse of legitimacy and trust in postdictatorial systems. On a political level, this crisis of both institutions and legitimacy favored the emergence of alternative discourses coming from the left, whose targeted enemy had a name: (neo)liberalism.

In these critiques, "liberalism" was primarily a specific set of public policies. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, the liberalization of the political regime was accompanied by an equally important rethinking of the economy's guiding principles. The first elections thus brought to power a ruling elite whose primary mission was to establish political and social stability by carrying out structural reforms that ensured a dual—political and economic—transformation. This new political class sketched out government plans based on a framework inspired by the so-called "Washington consensus": the disengagement of the state from strategic sectors of the economy; the deregulation of markets and the end of redistribution policies; the opening-up of all sectors of the economy to the flow of capital; the establishment of international trade links and the dismantling of protectionist measures supporting local production; and counter-inflationary monetary policies and fiscal rigor.⁸

The succession of economic crises in the 1990s—both regionally, such as the Mexican and Brazilian crises, and globally, such as the Asian crisis and the Russian currency crisis of 1998—severely tested the model's ability to generate growth and resilience

6 Daniel J. Corbo, "La transición de la dictadura a la democracia en el Uruguay. Perspectiva comparada sobre los modelos de salida política en el Cono Sur de América Latina", *Humanidades: revista de la Universidad de Montevideo*, año n°7 (2007): 23-47.

7 Sandrine Lefranc, "La justice transitionnelle n'est pas un concept," *Mouvements* 53, no. 1 (2008): 61-69, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mouv.053.0061>.

8 Douglas A. Irwin and Oliver Ward, "What is the Washington Consensus?" *RealTime Economics* (blog), Peterson Institute for International Economics, September 8, 2022, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realttime-economic-issues-watch/what-washington-consensus>.

in the face of shocks.⁹ An almost dogmatic application of price stability and open-market policies deprived governments of the capacity to act on monetary policy and protect domestic production. Maintaining key interest rates at high levels drastically reduced borrowing and investment capacity, paralyzing the productive fabric, which was vulnerable to external hazards. The ensuing contraction in activity highlighted the fragility of the employment conditions that had developed: low productivity, meager wages, and precarity.¹⁰

In the face of the crisis, informality began to spread to most economic sectors. Meanwhile, the decline in activity led to a drastic reduction in tax revenue, which, in combination with the existing debt, put public spending under severe pressure, leading some countries (such as Argentina) to default on payments in 2001. On the eve of the new millennium, Latin America had the highest level of inequality in the world.¹¹ The social cost of the 1990s was so high that public opinion demanded a radical transformation.

Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War had changed Washington's geopolitical priorities vis-à-vis the continent. The US had ceased to see the Latin American countries as an area of major strategic interest; instead, Washington's focus had come to be supporting the transition to democracy through a variety of cooperative programs conditioned on the implementation of structural reforms. After years of violent struggle against hotbeds of communism during the Cold War, the U.S. government's military and economic aid had come to be directed against two new priorities: drug trafficking and clandestine migration.¹² The new programs could be supported and financed by multilateral organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). The US envisioned that would be brought to fruition through the creation of a free trade area that would include 34 countries of the Western Hemisphere, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)—a major endeavor.

Faced with the deterioration of their situation, some Latinos opted to work in the informal sector or to participate in black markets.¹³ Meanwhile, policies against drug trafficking became more militarized. In countries such as Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, and Mexico, this led to a perception that poverty could be fought with violence, at a time when these states had almost completely ceased to engage in social policy. The violence generated both by the strict application of a costly model for socioeconomic transformation, on the one hand, and by the expansion of a parallel economy that fomented insecurity and precarity, on the other, deepened the rupture between elites and large segments of civil society.

This regional component was vital insofar as it allowed voices critical of liberalism to name those responsible for these failures: the U.S. government, along with international donors, which were seen as complicit with the political elite in weakening Latin American countries' sovereignty.

9 "Proyecciones América Latina 1999 – 2000," ECLAC/CEPAL. División de estadística y proyecciones económicas, December 1, 1999, <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/31364-proyecciones-latinoamericanas-1999-2000>.

10 Ibid.

11 NU.CEPAL, *A Decade of Social Development in Latin America, 1990 – 1999* (Santiago: ECLAC, 2004), <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/2383-decade-social-development-latin-america-1990-1999>.

12 Soeren Kern, "What Are US Interests in Latin America?" *ARI* 141 (2005), <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/what-are-us-interests-in-latin-america-ari/>.

13 NU.CEPAL, *A Decade of Social Development in Latin America, 1990 – 1999*.

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Dialectics and Tensions between Liberalism and Illiberalism in Latin America

The combination of these phenomena, which differed for each country, nourished the ground for demands and discourses of rupture. Liberalism was said to be responsible for increases in poverty and inequality, as well as for the creation of an oligarchy that governed according to a technocratic manual of reforms while ignoring the political reality. Moreover, for the model's detractors, the critique of (neo)liberalism was not limited to questioning reform policies, but included denouncing the omniscience of an ideological matrix that, according to them, had been imposed by "Western colonization"¹⁴ on the rest of the world. Liberalism, they alleged, had orchestrated a trusteeship from which countries needed to emancipate themselves in order to recover their confiscated sovereignty. In practice, this criticism translated into the rejection of what has been presented as the tacit consensus of the entire political class around liberal-developmental prescriptions.

In other words, despite the pluralism that had been established since the return of democracy, critics observed that the main parties competing in the electoral arena proposed political and economic programs that followed the same ideas. Thus, in addition to their lack of social anchoring, the political parties gradually lost their credibility due to the sharp deterioration of the socio-economic situation in several Latin American countries and that reinforced the desire to break away from liberalism and the party systems. The latter were accused of being accomplices in a plunder organized by external powers, led by the United States, with a view to maintaining control over the development capacities of Latin American countries.

The series of Latin American elections that began in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chávez as head of Venezuela gave these discordant voices the opportunity to begin overthrowing the ideological monopoly that they denounced. Almost in succession, Latin American voters turned to alternatives that declared themselves to be of the left and advocated for a relatively radical break with liberalism. After Venezuela, the socialist candidate of the Concertación, Ricardo Lagos, was elected president of Chile in 1999. Then followed the elections of Lula da Silva in Brazil in October 2002, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina in May 2003, and Tabaré Vázquez as the head of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front), which unites several left-wing groups in Uruguay, in October 2004. Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia in 2005, and Rafael Correa and Daniel Ortega followed in 2006 in Ecuador and Nicaragua, respectively.

All of these parties and coalitions and their leaders are anchored in particular histories, ideological lines, and national contexts. The social democracy of President Ricardo Lagos' Concertación in Chile, rooted in the long militant and partisan history of the Chilean left, for instance, was quite different from the national-popular and anti-capitalist "Bolivarian Revolution" theorized by Chávez in the 1990s. Yet they shared the ambition of giving the state greater capacity to intervene in the economic sphere, in some cases through the nationalization of enterprises and strategic resources, with the goal of enabling the state to redistribute wealth and thus return to playing a central role in social policy. They also aimed to restore the state's budgetary, commercial, and monetary sovereignty, including by reducing their dependence on international donors, and questioned the economic cooperation and development programs supported or supervised by the United States.

14 For a synthetic overview of this historical philosophical opposition to liberalism, see Catherine Andrews and Ariadna Acevedo Rodrigo, "One Hundred Years of Arrogance: Why 'Western' Liberalism Won't Save Latin America," *LSE Blogs*, June 4, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2020/06/04/one-hundred-years-of-arrogance-why-western-liberalism-wont-save-latin-america/>.

From Counter-Hegemonic Dialogue to Illiberal Understanding

In sum, this mosaic of left-wing governments had a common desire to overthrow the “liberal consensus” of the 1990s, albeit following different political programs depending on the national context. This can be referred to as the Latin American “pink tide” or “left turn” of the 2000s. Today, a few years after this “pink tide,” it is possible to characterize the discourses and positions that have conveyed this rejection of liberalism as illiberal. Illiberalism, in this sense, is not an ideology with its own doctrinal content. Instead, it refers—and has gradually given coherence—to a bundle of disparate experiences brought together by their rejection of liberalism. In Latin America, the meta-narratives of the “pink tide” that have produced this critical coherence can be grouped as follows:

Critique of market democracy/democratic capitalism

The criticism here is of the inextricable link between the democratic political system and the functioning of the economy governed by the principles of liberalism. Initially, none of the governments that emerged from the “pink tide” questioned the institutional achievements of the transition to democracy, which had made it possible for all citizens to participate in political life through suffrage. They did, however, point to the lack of conditions for the exercise of real democracy due to the application of neoliberal economic principles that deepened social inequalities instead of alleviating them. This global critique has taken form in different lines of political action, ranging from widespread wealth redistribution policies such as the “Bolsa Família,” introduced in Brazil during Lula da Silva’s first term, to the virulent anticapitalist speeches of the governments that have followed the Bolivarian line promoted by Chávez.

More recently, in Venezuela, but also in Nicaragua and Bolivia, there has been a progressive dismantling of electoral institutions and the system of representation. Indeed, these three countries have experienced serious dysfunctions in their electoral processes and violent attacks on political rights since the rises of Chávez,¹⁵ Evo Morales,¹⁶ and Daniel Ortega,¹⁷ respectively. This shows that the desire for rupture expressed by the most radical forms of rejection of liberalism went beyond purely economic considerations. For this left, the effectiveness of the profound transformations included in their political programs required a gradual overthrow of the democratic institutions that had preceded their rise to power.

Cultural-colonial liberalism

Unlike in Europe, the restoration of national sovereignty has been an inextricable component of the struggle for social justice led by Latin American leftwing parties and movements. The latter perceived the liberal experience of the 1990s as having confiscated this sovereignty due to the imposition of political and economic choices by international donors and the U.S. government. Several left-wing discourses (those of Morales, da Silva, José Mojica, and Chávez) equated neoliberalism with the colonial plundering of the Spanish Empire and appealed to the historical memory of

¹⁵ “Venezuela: Events of 2022,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/venezuela>.

¹⁶ “Bolivia: Events of 2022,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bolivia>.

¹⁷ “Nicaragua: Events of 2021,” Human Rights Watch, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

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the wars of independence of Latin American countries¹⁸ in calling for a continuation of that struggle against this “new phase of imperialism.”¹⁹

But this reification of an existential enemy in the figure of liberalism and its promoters is not linked solely to the origins of Latin American nations. Another explanation can be found in the very history of Latin American leftist movements and their ideological and militant anchoring in the Cold War. Some of these political movements originated in armed struggle, among them the Sandinista National Liberation Front of Nicaragua’s current president, Ortega. Similar movements have produced leading government cadres in other states: former president of Uruguay José Mujica had his political formation as part of the Tupamaros guerrilla movement. Other movements are left-wing parties with a tradition of dissidence during the era of dictatorships, such as the Chilean Socialist Party, or were founded by former members of these parties during the transition to democracy, such as the group of intellectuals and academics who founded the Movement towards Socialism in Bolivia. These diverse movements, parties, and leaders all claimed to be Marxist and socialist, making the fight against capitalism and “American imperialism” the founding vector of their mobilization.

The appeal to the memory of the wars of independence also configures the political identity upon which each of these movements, parties, and leftist leaders have built their quest for autonomy and/or sovereignty. Thus, the majority of Marxist and Maoist guerrillas that engaged in armed struggle exploited the image of sacrifice of the Indigenous revolts that broke out during the last decades of the Spanish presence in America. These revolts were incorporated into the historical narrative of the wars of independence in order to nourish the national imaginaries of those countries of the region that have substantial—even majority—indigenous populations.

In doing so, they reminded us that their struggle was ideologically anti-imperialist, but also anti-colonialist, since it aimed to restore the political authority of the Indigenous peoples on their ancestral land. Their relationship to sovereignty is thus defined according to an identity framework that can be described as Indianist. The archetypal movement in this regard is the Uruguayan Tupamaros, but others include the Peruvian MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru), the Bolivian EGTK (Ejército Guerrillero Túpac Katari) of former vice-president Alvaro García Linera, the OPRA (Organización del Pueblo en Armas) during the Guatemalan Civil War, and even the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) in Mexico.

Among the “pink tide” governments, the most complex attempt to structure this form of sovereignty was undertaken by the Bolivian Movement towards Socialism when Morales became president in 2006. In principle, it was a socialist political project combined with a demand to enshrine the indigenous nations as the preferred collectives around which the whole social contract and government regime was structured in the constitution (approved in 2009). The changing of the country’s name from the Republic of Bolivia to the Plurinational State of Bolivia clearly highlights this intention.

Another configuration of this sovereigntist struggle is regionalism, embodied most visibly by Venezuelan Bolivarianism. The appeal to the memory of the wars of

¹⁸ Carlos Malamud, *El sueño de Bolívar y la manipulación bolivariana: Falsificación de la historia e integración regional en América Latina* (Madrid: Alianza editorial, 2021), 295.

¹⁹ For an overview of this geopolitical analysis, see Atilio Borón, *América Latina en la geopolítica del imperialismo* (Hondarriba: editorial Hiru Argitaletxea, 2013), 521, <https://www.mintrabajo.gob.bo/?p=2993>.

independence is heavily emphasized here, as this political project seeks to revive unfulfilled efforts to unify the former Spanish colonies of America into a single political entity. Indeed, “Bolivarianism” refers to the project of the one whom Latin American historiography praises as “the liberator” of America, namely Simón Bolívar.²⁰ Although Bolívar’s original project took the more ambiguous form of a league of independent nations, the romanticized memory of the sequence of wars of independence, amply exploited by Bolivarian communication and propaganda, retains the idea of a desire for unification that is being prevented by obscure political and private interests. For the Bolivarian left, which claims to be part of this movement, it is a question of continuing Bolívar’s unfinished effort to consolidate the sovereignty of Latin American nations vis-à-vis the powers that have taken advantage of their division, in particular the United States.

Other manifestations of this regionalism have also emerged, such as the *Patria Grande* (“the Great Homeland”), which originated from the pen of the Argentine lawyer and leftist activist Manuel Ugarte in a book written in 1922,²¹ and, more recently, the decolonial and Indianist vision of “Abya Yala.”²² Ugarte’s concept of a great homeland joins other intellectual and revolutionary ideas that appeared in Latin America between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century and combined nationalism with ideas of social justice, often inspired by socialist and Marxist principles. These expressions converged on two essential points: rethinking the condition of Latin America as a formerly colonized space in order to generate a strong regional identity; and categorically rejecting any new expansionist covetousness akin to American imperialism in the twentieth century. The term “Great Homeland” has featured prominently in the rhetoric of several “pink tide” leaders, including Correa, da Silva, and Chávez, but especially Argentina’s former president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Distinct from its European ethno-national and culturalist side, the Latin American left has constructed its idea of sovereignty within a relationship of the weak to the strong, taking colonial history and the wars of independence as the starting point of a still-unfinished struggle for autonomy, sovereignty, and identity.

Critique(s) of geopolitical liberalism

This critique follows directly from the previous one. In this narrative, liberalism is the ideology of the strong, for under the veil of freedom and respect for individual rights hides a real intention to expand, conquer, and eliminate alternative models. The unity so advocated by regionalist discourses is thus based on geopolitical reasoning, since it aspires to rebalance power relations between the dominant liberal narrative and anti-imperialist models that represent the “voice of the people.” This posture is brandished internationally to attack the foreign policies of Western countries. Most often, it is formulated as a denunciation of Western states’ willingness to disregard the principles that govern the inviolability of state sovereignty in international law as soon as their own interests are at stake.

20 Nelson Martínez Díaz, “Simón Bolívar: el proyecto inconcluso,” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 401 (November 1983): 5–20, <https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/simon-bolivar-el-proyecto-inconcluso/>.

21 Manuel Andrés García, “De la Patria Grande a la Madre Patria: Manuel Ugarte y el hispanoamericanismo español (1900–1930),” *Revista de las Indias* Vol. LXXIV, no. 261 Hondarribia: editorial Hiru Argitaletxea 591–622, <https://doi.org/10.3989/revindias.2014.020>.

22 For an overview of this decolonial paradigm, see Enrique Dussel, *El encubrimiento del otro. Hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad* (Madrid: Editorial Nueva Utopía, 1993).

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In the particular case of the Latin American left, the criticism has been fueled by memories of U.S. interference, whether in the form of military interventions, political and material support for military and civilian dictatorships, or operations carried out in support of the so-called “counterinsurgency” during the Cold War. Today, the elements of language and the speeches that are derived from them interpret the regional stakes according to the same reading keys that dominated the second half of the twentieth century, despite the radical change of context. Some “pink tide” governments, particularly those of the Bolivarian axis, have constructed a foreign policy narrative according to which there is an imminent threat of U.S. intervention to overthrow them. This narrative was widely emphasized during the postelection crises in Venezuela in 2018, Bolivia in 2019, and Nicaragua in 2020; challenges to the processes and results of the elections by opposition forces led the incumbent leaders—Nicolás Maduro, Morales, and Ortega—to condemn and vehemently denounce supposed U.S. interference to destabilize them.

These accusations have effectively recreated the illusion of self-fulfilling prophecies about the supposed American threat to left-wing governments. The staging of these prophecies and the narratives they generate remains a major element of the information warfare in which several pink-wave governments have engaged since their formation in the 2000s. The creation of the TeleSUR news channel in 2005 by the Chávez regime is emblematic of this. Relaying disinformation and propaganda in support of the Bolivarian project, the regional and international mission of the channel is reflected by the ideology it broadcasts to the vast Latin American audience it targets.²³ In fact, Chávez managed to mobilize several left-wing governments to collaborate logistically and participate as shareholders in the channel’s early years.

In addition to the governments that followed the Bolivarian line (Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Cuba), Argentina under President Nestor Kirchner and Uruguay under President Vázquez also joined in. On the extraregional level, TeleSUR had initially signed a cooperation agreement for the development of joint productions with the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, from which it drew much of the inspiration for its creation. Subsequently, TeleSUR expanded this cooperation framework to work with IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), whose Spanish language subsidiary is HispanTV; with the BBC; and then with RT en Español, Al Mayadeen (Lebanon), and finally China’s CGTN.²⁴

The intention is to spread throughout the Spanish-speaking world a discourse of mobilization against American imperialism, but also to provide a range of alternative readings of events that enable viewers to understand the world in a register different from the dominant Western liberalism. Inspired by the concept of “hegemony” put forward by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, this desire to overturn liberalism as a factor of cultural hegemony is one of the most consolidated forms of action of this geopolitical dimension within the “pink tide.” The discourses, practices, and narratives that prove the failure of liberalism in the different countries are gathered and transformed into media events, producing what can be described as a counter hegemonic dialogue.

It is this dialogue that allows the articulation of a bundle of experiences gathered around a rejection of liberalism and the West, despite the heterogeneous nature of

²³ Pablo Sebastian Morales, “Counter-Hegemonic Collaborations or Alliances of the Underdogs? The Case of TeleSUR with Al-Mayadeen, RT and CGTN,” *Global Media and Communication* 18, no. 3 (2022): 365–382, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665221125549>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the contexts in which this rejection occurs. It is thus about an elastic articulation, whose coherence is heteromorphic since it acquires a political sense only according to the context and the event that it covers. This articulation follows what Zygmunt Baumann describes as the logic of the postmodern world: it is shaped by media immediacy, economic and cultural globalization, a fragmented world of competing and contrasting identities, and the idea that knowledge is inter-subjective and self-referential.²⁵ It is this type of articulation that today structures the essential relations between Russia and Latin American countries.

The Russo-Latin American Dialogue, or the Construction of a Singular Illiberal Ideological Line

After the fall of the USSR, Russia underwent profound changes constituting a liberal shift—experienced as a crisis of meaning with multiple dimensions. During the Boris Yeltsin years, Russia endured a painful transition to a market economy, marked by a destatization that brutally drained the state's fiscal resources while drastically reducing its macroeconomic levers of intervention. The spectacular fall in life expectancy was accompanied by a deepening of inequalities between the beneficiaries of opaque privatizations and the vast majority of Russians, whose life savings had been wiped out—and their incomes reduced to almost nothing—by the ruble's uncontrolled inflation.

As in some Latin American countries, a poorly regulated informal subsistence economy left Russian society prey to corruption and the violence of criminal groups. Finally, in the face of unfulfilled promises of prosperity, a desire to regain political control that was fiercely opposed to liberalism asserted itself. This was expressed in Latin America by the public voting out incumbent liberal governments in favor of the “pink tide,” and in Russia through the change of course of Yeltsin's successor as head of state, Vladimir Putin. It should be noted that the reforms of the 1990s in Russia and Latin America proceeded from the same liberal intellectual root and tended toward the same recommendations.²⁶

These similarities should not obscure the fact that the Russian and Latin American trajectories actually differed in important ways, especially in terms of the degree of state ownership of their economies, the weight of their industrial sectors, and these industrial sectors' capacity to absorb labor. However, the correlated socio-political effects led to similar interpretations of and reactions to liberalism. In both cases, politicians emphasized the need to contest these reforms—perceived, rightly or wrongly, as harmful—in order to break with the prevailing model of society and provide populations with the new path they sought. The denunciation of liberalism, its institutions (the IMF, the World Bank), and its promoters (the United States, the West) thus led to a confluence of reactionary visions and common feelings much more than it opened the way to new, sustainable political alliances structured around alternative common values. This was the starting point of the counter hegemonic dialogue between Russia and the Latin American countries that would later produce a true illiberal entente.

25 Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction.”

26 Anouk Jordan and Julien Verceuil, “Gouvernance et transition : le rôle du FMI dans la conduite des réformes en Russie” (paper prepared for the 16th International Symposium on Money, Banking and Finance, University of Poitiers, Poitiers, France, 1999).

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Weakness of Structuring Geopolitical Elements and the Pre-Eminence of Political Relations

The advent of the “pink tide” in the early 2000s coincided with a reinvention of Latin American geopolitics. In addition to this major political reversal, there were profound changes in strategic orientation in Washington after September 11, 2001, as well as the beginning of a period of growth unprecedented in Latin America’s economic history. This provided the impetus for the creation of new—competing—dynamics of regional integration, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Pacific Alliance, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). This momentum attracted the attention of emerging powers that, a decade after the Cold War, began to jockey for position with the United States in what had historically been its Latin American “preserve,” first and foremost China. This opening of Latin America to the rest of the world was part of the globalization desired and promoted by Western countries. At least initially, the revival of relations between Russia and Latin American countries could be viewed as part of that trend.

If the first attempts at rapprochement were the work of Yevgeny Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs, it was during Putin’s presidency that these exchanges progressively took a concrete form, thanks to the successive electoral victories of Latin American leftwing parties. The latter sought to diversify their partnerships, and Russia appeared to be one of the most promising options due to the size of its economy and the reputation for technical and scientific know-how that it had inherited from the Soviet period, both of which were attractive to countries seeking modernization.

Twenty years after these first exchanges, it is clear that the overall results of these relations are mixed. Russia suffers from comparisons with China, which has successfully pursued political and economic agendas in Latin America. For Russia, Latin America represents only a tiny part of its trade balance, having never exceeded 2.6% since 2000. In 2020, the volume of trade between the two regions was \$11.9 billion, 64 and 26 times lower than the United States and China, respectively. Russia represents only the 15th fifteenth-largest export market for Latin American products—behind such countries as the Netherlands, Spain, India, and South Korea—and is the twentieth-largest supplier of goods to Latin America. Moreover, the dynamics of this trade have been declining for about ten years (having peaked in 2013 at \$18 billion), a situation that has only been aggravated by the war in Ukraine.²⁷

Russia has few economic tools to offer to Latin America, but the two it has concern critical strategic aspects: the military-industrial complex and energy production-related sectors (hydrocarbons, civil nuclear power, and hydroelectricity). Yet its influence in these spheres is circumscribed by politics and geography. Russia has concentrated most of its economic efforts on a limited number of countries in the region. First, there are the major regional economies, specifically Brazil, Russia’s leading trade partner in Latin America. Being better integrated into global value chains, these countries have higher requirements than the rest of the continent when it comes to establishing partnerships, contracts, and cooperation projects. Russia has therefore had difficulty positioning itself in these markets, mainly due to the overwhelming weight of Chinese competition, which is better equipped to meet their economic, technological, and financial expectations.

²⁷ Yana Leksyutina, “Russia’s Economic Outreach in Latin America,” Center for the Study of the Global Economic Future, August 23, 2021, <https://www.csgef.org/russias-economic-outreach-in-latin-america>.

Then there are the countries of the Bolivarian axis, in which Russia has successfully invested most of its efforts. These include Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba, and to a lesser extent Ecuador, with Venezuela becoming the archetype of Russian success in Latin America. The radical anti-Americanism shared by Chávez and Putin, as well as their praetorian practices of power, consolidated a relationship of trust between the two leaders that gradually translated into an unprecedented rapprochement. Since 2000, this rapprochement has intensified as events have sharpened their perceptions of the threat represented by the United States and its Western allies.

The favorable reception in Caracas of Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference marked a first political milestone. This later led to Venezuela's refusal to recognize the independence of Kosovo, and then its support for Russia during the war in Georgia and recognition of the independence of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁸ For Chavez, the Munich speech clarified that he and his Russian counterpart were converging on a shared view that a unipolar world—with, in Putin's words, "one single center of power, one single center of force and one single master"²⁹—was unacceptable. Chavez interpreted this declaration through the prism of the geopolitical considerations enshrined in the "Simon Bolivar Project 2007 – 2013," which proposed to "consolidate an emerging integral political alliance under the basis of common anti-imperialist interests." Venezuela targeted three countries for inclusion in this alliance: Iran, Syria, and Russia.³⁰

For his part, Putin saw Chavez's support as an opportunity to test the thesis of the equivalence of spheres of influence, which made Latin America the mirror of Russia's "near abroad." According to this geopolitical vision, inherited from the Soviet period, to the degree that the United States intervenes in Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or Central Asia, Russia must reciprocally make its presence felt in Latin America. Thus, during the Georgian war of 2008, Russia sent Tu-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela for a joint naval exercise in the Caribbean. Sea as a counterpoint to U.S. support for an increasingly pro-Western Ukraine and Georgia; in 2010, Chávez offered Russia the use of a Caribbean coastal air base.³¹

This type of military posturing, based on the reciprocity of influence zones, has occurred each time Russia has evoked a threat to its security emanating from the West, as with the first Russo-Ukrainian conflict of 2013, and 2018.³² But in practice, it has never translated into a real Russian willingness to take military action in the Western Hemisphere (such as in Syria), even when the Maduro regime faltered in 2018. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the lack of credibility of this vision, despite the Foreign Policy Concept of Russian Federation's claim that its main

28 Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads," Wilson Center Latin American Program—Kennan Institute (February 2019), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russian-venezuelan-relations-crossroads>.

29 "Putin Says U.S. Wants to Dominate the World," *Reuters*, February 10, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-idUSL1053774820070210>.

30 Alexandra Sitenko, "Latin American Vector in Russia's Foreign Policy: Identities and Interest in the Russian-Venezuelan Partnership," *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 1 (April 2016): 37–57, <https://doi.org/10.1515/pece-2016-0003>.

31 John E. Herbst and Jason Marczak, "Russia's Intervention in Venezuela: What's at Stake?" *Policy Brief*, Atlantic Council Eurasia Center and Adriene Arsht Latin America Center (September 2019), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Russia-Venezuela-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

32 Ryan C. Berg, "What Does Russia's War in Ukraine Mean for Latin America and the Caribbean?," *Crisis Crossroads*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (March 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

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partners in Latin America have been “strategic” since 2013.³³ Thus, the declarations of Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov that Moscow could not rule out sending “military infrastructure” to Venezuela or Cuba should tensions with Washington continue to rise,³⁴ have never translated into concrete action. Also, considering the already examined limits of their economic partnerships, one observe in fact that Russia does not see Latin America, neither as a space, nor as a set of truly strategic partners.

On another issue, Putin and Chavez wanted to build an economic development model based on the exploitation of the rich reserves of raw materials they had at their disposal, in order to provide the political decision-making centers with the resources necessary to carry out their programs and thus liberate them from the institutional constraints of democracy. Naturally, Venezuela became a host country for Russian energy and arms companies, both of which it was the leading importer until 2016, absorbing more than half of Russia’s exports to the region in this sector. As a proxy for the Russian regime, the Russian oil company Rosneft has also played an important role in the development of the economic crisis that has hit Venezuela since 2016, obtaining concessions for the exploitation of Venezuelan oil in exchange for debt refinancing and loans to support PDVSA (Petroleos de Venezuela) and the Maduro regime.

The rest of the countries in the region have developed diplomatic relations of a purely protocolary nature, limited to mutual recognition and friendship (supplemented by occasional deals). For Russia, the Latin American countries constitute a reservoir of favorable votes in the United Nations General Assembly, especially on resolutions concerning the crises that oppose it to Western countries. However, it would be wrong to interpret these votes as systematic alignment with an antiWestern bloc led by Russia. The degree to which Latin American countries have voted with Russia has varied depending on the issue and/or the period, implying that they tend to be affected by the influence games that take place in the corridors of UN diplomacy. This demonstrates the extreme weakness of Russian bilateral diplomacy, which is engaged, above all, in a quest for short-term economic opportunities.

Although Russia has limited influence at the regional level, it nevertheless enjoys significant levers of action in certain countries. Like the Bolivarian regimes, its influence proliferates in political spaces where illiberalism has gradually become a principle of action. This illiberal political agreement, which creates links between countries, is the dominant element to which the economic, commercial, technical, and cooperation dimensions are subordinated.

Materialization of the Illiberal Agreement and Levers of Russian Influence in Latin America

This subordination of structural elements in the construction of links between countries constitutes a new practice in international relations. Illiberalism, through the counter-hegemonic dialogue, is also the producer of a system—that is, of a mechanism of relations between states that takes advantage of the hypertension

33 Vladimir Rouvinski, “El retorno ruso. Cinco claves para entender las relaciones de la Rusia postsoviética con América Latina y el Caribe,” *Fundación Carolina Documento de Trabajo* 36 (2020), <https://www.fundacioncarolina.es/el-retorno-ruso-cinco-claves-para-entender-las-relaciones-de-la-rusia-postsovietica-con-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>.

34 “Russia Suggests Military Deployment to Venezuela, Cuba if Tensions with U.S. Remain High,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-u-s-russia-talks-over-ukraine-kyiv-gets-a-voice-11642061460>.

of the media flow to generate a countercurrent of discourses and images. This countercurrent seeks to extract political added value from the facts according not to a rational evaluation of technological, economic, or social contributions that feed the debate, but to the opportunity to demonstrate the defeat of the universal, humanistic, democratic, and individualistic claim of liberalism. It is worth remembering that, as Marlene Laruelle argues, “for Russian elites and for a large part of population, illiberalism supplies an appealing framework for making sense of the world. It is, for many Russians, a genuine producer of common sense.”³⁵ Along these lines, the so-called “Young Conservatives” school of thought promotes the idea that the future of the country depends on the adoption of illiberalism (or, to use the term most commonly employed in Russia, “conservatism”) as a vehicle for a dynamic of radical change and opposition against the global liberal status quo. From a philosophical point of view, this Russian conservatism is radically skeptical of the notion of freedom in the Enlightenment sense, in which each individual becomes a historical actor thanks to their own choices. It is also wary of ideas of progress and universalism, and relies heavily on a cultural-civilizational approach to history to emphasize the importance of culture and ideas in social development.³⁶

Given its heterogeneity, the ideology that unifies the Latin American left is more difficult to define. Its critique of neoliberalism, largely imbued with Marxist-Leninist elements, refers to an approach that philosophically aspires to humanism and universalism. On the other hand, the construction of alternative proposals generally calls for systemic reversals, the content of which may contradict the values inscribed in the philosophical foundations of the critique. For instance, the decolonial sovereigntist approach aims to reconnect with the true identity of the peoples of America, the one that preceded the arrival of “modernity” under the aegis of European conquest. The Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel expresses this vision:

It is necessary to change skin, to have new eyes. Will no longer be the skin and the eyes of the Conquiro Ego who will end up in the Ego Cogito or in the “will-to-power”. Must no longer be the hands that grasp the iron, and the eyes that see from the carabellas to the “European intruders” and cry “Land!” next to Colon. Now we must be the soft tanned skin of the Caribbean, the Andean, the Amazonian. [...] We must have the skin of the other, of another ego, of an ego from which we must reconstruct the process of its formation (like the other face of modernity) [...] To change skin like the serpent, but not like the one that tempted Adam in Mesopotamia, but the “feathered serpent”, the Divine Duality (Quetzalcoatl), which “changes skin” to grow. Let’s change our skin, let’s adopt that of the Indian, the African slave, the humiliated mestizo, the impoverished peasant, the exploited worker, the marginalized who by the millions has gone back to Latin American cities.³⁷

35 Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 115-129, <http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>.

36 Elena Chebankova, “Russian Fundamental Conservatism: In Search of Modernity,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2013): 287-313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2013.786579>.

37 Dussel, *El encubrimiento del otro*, 83-84.

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Even if, unlike in Russia, this vision has not been “étatized”³⁸ wherever the left has ruled, a strong regional solidarity has served to symbolically highlight the ideological proximity of the “pink tide” despite its diversity. To wit, despite the predominance of Bolivarian rhetorical approach in Venezuelan regionalism, Hugo Chavez did not hesitate to seize, in his speeches, on the essentialist dimension that prevailed in Evo Morales’ Bolivia in order to recall the unity of the Latin American left. But the most significant room for expression of these ideological and political solidarity were the “Sao Paulo Forum.” Created in 1990 with the aim of “moving forward with consensual proposals, in a spirit of unity of action, in view of anti-imperialist and popular struggles,”³⁹ this body served as a dialogue platform for governments of the pink tide, as well as for left-wing parties and activists from all over Spanish-speaking world. It would also be the point of departure of large-scale regional integration initiatives, such as UNASUR. Some right-wing governments and conservative parties in Latin America (former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe, former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, etc.) have accused the Sao Paulo Forum of fomenting the destabilization of democracy in the region, by giving the organization more power than it actually has.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is certain that the Sao Paulo Forum, as well as other less visible rooms, allowed a circulation of symbolic and ideological resources that has made it possible to produce coherence through the idea of the convergence of struggles against the “liberal imperialism.”⁴¹ It has also made it possible to weld together an activist space dispersed throughout the continent, propelled by the unique linguistic vector of the Spanish language. It is this niche of continental opinion that Russian public diplomacy has particularly targeted, even in countries that have not been ruled by the left.

The many similarities in the construction of alternative models between Russia and Latin America explain the seemingly contradictory rapprochement between Russian Christian civilizational conservatism and the Latin American lefts. Their counter-hegemonic dialogue is rooted not in a pairing of ideas and consolidated political principles, but in the coherence of a flexible ideology that is built by contingencies.

Analysis of the diversity of contexts and sequences that have built this coherence allows us to trace the contours of this counter-hegemonic dialogue between Russians and Latin Americans. I identify three key themes, each of them declined in several forms of action and modes of operation. The materialization of this dialogue is much less ideologically monolithic than that of European civilizational conservatism, giving proof of its praxeological flexibility. Through these guidelines, Russia mobilizes a set of resources of influence that grant it a prominent place within the illiberal entente.

Soviet legacy in the Third World

The Bolivarian movement in particular and the left-wing parties that came to power in the first decade of the 2000s in general bear the imprint of the political struggles waged in various forms during the Cold War years. Anti-imperialism, as well as regionalism of Third World or internationalist origin, resonate with this past and thus appear as legacies and continuities. They manifest themselves in the memory of

38 Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism.”

39 “Foro de Sao Paulo, Breve historial y fundamentos”, (e.g., accessed on April 25, 2023), <https://forodesaopaulo.org/breve-historial-y-fundamentos/>.

40 “Paro nacional: qué es el Foro de Sao Paulo, al que vinculan con las protestas en Chile o Colombia (y por qué le preocupa tanto a la derecha de América Latina),” *BBC News Mundo*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50481480>.

41 Robert Cooper, “The Liberal Imperialism”, *The Guardian*, April 7, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/07/1>.

Sandinismo in Ortega's Nicaragua; of Allende's Popular Unity for the Chilean Frente Amplio; and of Fidel Castro's fight against the United States, which in the eyes of Venezuelan Chavists is akin to that of Simón Bolívar against the Spanish Empire.

The USSR bequeathed to the countries of the Bolivarian axis of revolutionary inspiration a model of political administrative organization with ultra-concentrated powers that functioned through a state bureaucracy placed in the hands of a *nomenklatura* and that exalted, ideologically, an anti-imperialist discourse. The patrimonialization of the state apparatus by the ruling parties in these states has resulted in systematic violations of fundamental rights, as well as the criminalization of plural political representation and diversity of opinion.⁴²

Outside the Bolivarian axis, the restoration of equipment and infrastructure exported by the USSR, as well as the cooperation mechanisms of the Soviet period, has mainly occurred in the former bridgeheads of Soviet influence in Latin America: Cuba and Nicaragua. However, other countries to which the USSR exported its industrial and military know-how—among them Argentina, Brazil, and Peru—can also be included in this group, despite the ideological distance that separates them from the Bolivarian axis.

Sovereignty

The denunciation of interventionism and the promotion of a nationalist, regionalist, and/or indigenous popular essentialism, as opposed to the alienation caused by liberal globalization, is one of the major vectors that has energized the dialogue between Russia and Latin American countries. But sovereignty also manifests itself in other forms, for example in the conduct of economic policy. Russia has thus found points of convergence with countries that have engaged in nationalization and the recovery of strategic resources in order to centralize their management and exploitation at the heart of the state.

In the same way, the desire to free their countries from the monetary, financial, and commercial diktat of the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank have been recurrent leitmotifs of Latin American leaders' policy, generating opportunities for rapprochement between Latin Americans and Russians. One example is the creation of the BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB), which aims to identify alternative sources of development financing. The latter was very active during the COVID19 pandemic, with mixed success. At the bilateral level, Argentine President Alberto Fernández's visit to Moscow on February 2, 2022, a few days before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, also illustrates the structuring character of the counter-hegemonic dialogue. As the threat of another default loomed over the Argentine state, President Fernández embarked on a tour of several European countries, in addition to Russia and China, in search of partnerships and alternative sources of financing. During their meeting, Fernández is said to have told Putin of his

42 On Venezuela, see Amelia Cheatham, Diana Roy, and Rocío Cara Labrador, "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate," *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder*, last updated March 10, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/venezuela-crisis>. On Nicaragua, see Salvador Martí i Puig and Macià Serra, "Nicaragua: Democratization and Regime Crisis," *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 2 (2020): 117-136, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2019.64>. On Bolivia, see Omar Sánchez-Sibony, "Competitive Authoritarianism in Morales's Bolivia: Skewing Arenas of Competition," *Latin American Politics and Society* 63, no. 1 (2021): 118-44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.35>.

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desire to make Argentina “the gateway to Russia in Latin America,” while accusing the United States of having a negative influence on the IMF.⁴³

Putin’s reception of Fernández and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro within a few days of each other in February forces us to question the idea that the internal ideological-political positioning of each government explains their rapprochement. After all, belonging to political families as diverse as the Atlanticist far right (Bolsonaro), the Peronist statist left (Fernández), and Russian state conservatism did not prevent a general dialogue that converged around a rejection of the mechanisms of the liberal system. The counter-hegemonic dialogue through sovereigntism is therefore constructed on the contingency of facts and opportunities that allow the production of shared narratives, bringing to light an overall coherence that produces an illiberal discourse.

Political alternative

The projection of Russian influence in Latin America is founded on Russia’s self-branding as an alternative to the liberal system dominated by Western countries. In this sense, some Russian initiatives are supported by other transnational actors that have broken with the Western liberal model. We have mentioned the case of the Bolivarian governments, which converge with Moscow on this rejection. But Russia has also been able to count on the support of certain Latin American academic, intellectual, and media elites who, for various reasons, have also broken with the principles of liberalism and are rising up against what they perceive as Western countries’ desire for domination and hegemony. Russia has also managed to sway Latin American public opinion, thanks in particular to these media centers: RT en Español, Sputnik Mundo, and Russia Beyond en Español.

Russia has succeeded in embodying this alternative to the West by projecting an image of an independent power, capable of keeping the United States and its allies at bay. For the Latin American left in particular, the figure of the former Soviet superpower plays a major role in the representation it has of contemporary Russia. It should be noted that during the Cold War, the USSR participated in the training of political and military cadres in Latin America, serving as a model for the structuring of militant networks, and set a revolutionary orientation which largely inspired the political projects of the Bolivarian axis. Thus, unlike China, Russia can rely on its past prestige as a valuable symbolic resource for projecting its influence in the region.

Beyond its own symbolic and material resources, Russia also depends on representations of the world that are constructed within the Latin American countries themselves and form their citizens’ opinions. This construction is the work of a set of institutions that maintain what Michel Foucault calls “the political economy of truth.” Foucault refers to the way in which certain institutions—which he calls “political apparatuses of education and information” (national education, universities, the media, public institutions)—have the power to produce and disseminate discourses that can impose a normativity of reference, or approved truth.⁴⁴ In the case of Latin America, the material resources (institutions and equipment) and immaterial resources (quality of R&D, prestige of its institutions, influential media) that allow

43 “Alberto Fernandez le ofrece a Rusia que Argentina sea su puerta de entrada en Latinoamerica.” *El Pais*, February 4, 2022, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-02-04/alberto-fernandez-le-ofrece-a-rusia-que-argentina-sea-su-puerta-de-entrada-a-america-latina.html>.

44 Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II 1976-1988* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), cited in Olivier Guerrier, “Qu’est-ce qu’un ‘régime de vérité’ ?” *Les Cahiers de Framespa* 35 (October 30, 2020), <http://journals.openedition.org/framespa/10067>.

them to structure and sacralize their own space of production of truth—whether in terms of education, production of knowledge, culture, or information—are sometimes, depending on the country, extremely limited.

This makes Latin America a permeable space for the penetration of ideas, information, and diverse contents, not least because there is no normative, institutional, and scientific regulation valid for all the countries of the Spanish-speaking world. The regional context of contestation of models since the rise of the “pink tide” in the 2000s and the exacerbation of political violence since the reemergence in the second half of the 2010s of extreme right-wing political lines have further weakened these systems of reference production. This strong polarization of the political and societal realm in Latin America has largely benefitted Russia, facilitating its media centers’ efforts to conduct informational warfare by spreading disinformation and fake news. It is in this field that Russia has achieved its most significant successes in the region.

Informational Influence as a Driving Force behind the Construction of Transnational Illiberalism

Russian public diplomacy focuses on enhancing the domestic, the national, and the regional without making any humanistic promise related to a sharing of universal values. Its mission thus seems to be to enhance local sovereignty (of both the right and the left) insofar as it opposes the changes imposed by a globalized international liberal order that is considered hostile. This sets it apart from the American soft power model, which is based on elites’ attraction to liberal democracy, the attractiveness of English as a language for gaining access to the globalized world, and the promotion of consumer society as a means of emancipating the middle classes. The latter is the historical model that has predominated in Latin America since at least 1945.

The creation, in 2009, of RT’s Spanish-language branch and its success in Latin America illustrate the extent of the paradigm shift that took place in the 2000s. The channel uses Spanish (not English or Russian) as a vehicle for regional unity and almost exclusively exposes local realities, without promoting a single political and/or economic model. This first information system was completed in 2014 with the creation of Sputnik Mundo and Sputnik Brasil, Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking branches of the Russian news agency that are based in Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro, respectively. Unlike RT, a detailed analysis of the audience of these two media centers is lacking to date. The SimilarWeb platform shows, however, that the site [sputniknews.lat](https://www.sputniknews.lat) (Sputnik Mundo) received 6.6 million visits in February 2023. The main countries from which these visits came were, in order, Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Spain, and Chile.⁴⁵ As for [sputniknewsbrasil.com.br](https://www.sputniknewsbrasil.com.br), the platform received 6.9 million visits in that month. The vast majority of these requests came from Brazil (95%), but such countries as Angola, Portugal, and even Chile and France were also represented.⁴⁶

The media ecosystem comprised of RT en Español and the Sputnik agencies prides itself on revealing the hidden aspects of an international system dominated by the United States and Western countries. This claim has a special significance due to the difficult history of inter-American relations and the place of anti-imperialism in the ideological construction of the left in Latin America. Unsurprisingly, the sites’

⁴⁵ “[sputniknews.lat](https://www.sputniknews.lat)Classement,” SimilarWeb, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.similarweb.com/fr/website/sputniknews.lat/#ranking>.

⁴⁶ “[sputniknewsbrasil.com.br](https://www.sputniknewsbrasil.com.br),” SimilarWeb, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.similarweb.com/fr/website/sputniknewsbrasil.com.br/#overview>.

editorial content has largely been slanted in favor of the political processes initiated by the “pink tide” governments and has come to aggressively defend the regimes of the Bolivarian axis. Because of its historically dominant position and the violence of its past interventions, U.S. foreign policy is a prolific subject for the production of (often unfounded) alarmist polemics. These polemics most often take two forms: self-fulfilling prophecies announcing a military intervention by the United States, thus confirming the hegemonic vocation of its policies and values; and deliberately inaccurate interpretations of the facts that would tend to disadvantage American foreign policy and the prestige of Washington. The raw material of this form of media treatment is conflict. Evgeny Pashentsev, a specialist in Latin America at St. Petersburg State University, identifies four types of tensions that can be exploited in the context of informational warfare in Latin America.⁴⁷

International tensions refer to the conflicts between Russia, China, the United States, and its allies, NATO and the European Union. If these conflicts do not directly affect Latin America, they are likely to put focus on Russia’s leadership vis-à-vis the West. For example, the former and current Brazilian presidents, Bolsonaro and da Silva, have done little to hide their support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, even though they disagree violently on almost all domestic issues. While Bolsonaro declared his solidarity with Russia during his visit to Moscow, da Silva blamed both Volodymyr Zelensky and Putin for the war because Zelensky would allow NATO to expand to Russia’s borders. The alignment to the Russian argument about the existential threat of Ukraine joining NATO is obvious.

Regional concerns refer to friction between different Latin American countries, especially when it comes to confrontations between pro-U.S. right-wing and anti-imperialist left-wing governments. The tensions on the Colombia-Venezuela border over the passage of the humanitarian convoy stopped by pro-Maduro forces in 2019, or the peace negotiations between FARC guerrillas and the Colombian government (in which the Venezuelan regime has been heavily involved), provide illustrations of this.

National concerns relate to the cleavages between the different political forces of a country, viewed through the prism of a fundamental opposition between the liberal/conservative right and the sovereigntist left. The strong political polarization perceptible, to varying degrees, in almost all Latin American countries has translated into a great political crisis, such as that seen in Brazil at the time of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2014. We can also mention Peru between 2016 and 2022, or highly contested elections such as those in Bolivia in 2019, where RT has widely defended the coup d’état thesis put forward by former president Morales.

Social concerns relate to the social conflicts generated by the chronic inequalities that affect most Latin American countries, where the scenes of repression of certain mobilizations—most often assimilated to the left—by right-wing governments constitute powerful narrative material. The 2019 mobilizations in Chile against the government of Sebastián Piñera, but also those that took place in Colombia in 2020 against the government of Iván Duque, are clear examples of this form of tension, which has also been exploited by RT.

⁴⁷ Evgeny Pashentsev, “Strategic Communications of Russia in Latin America,” in *Russia’s Public Diplomacy, Evolution and Practice*, edited by Anna Velikaya and Greg Simmons (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 219–231.

Beyond the objective analysis of each of these tensions we observe that the Russian channel invariably defends the posture that is on the left of the political spectrum. The defense of this left-wing line is not limited to the countries of the Bolivarian axis, which are considered intimate with Moscow, but targets the entire left in the Spanish-speaking world. The participation in these media of experts belonging to local think tanks closely linked to the political structures of the left, intellectuals historically attached to leftist values, and former political figures of the “pink tide” as chroniclers and analysts demonstrates the intention to articulate the diverse representations of this spectrum while bringing together political actors, opinion-makers, and activists in a single form of expression.

A series of studies published by *actualidad.rt.com* on the dissemination of content via social networks and the Web shows that a significant number of socio-institutional spaces (unions, associations, third sector media, NGOs) massively relay materials produced by the channel throughout the region.⁴⁸ RT thus serves as an authoritative source of information for the most radical end of the Spanish-speaking left, acting as a distribution center for narrative materials. But it is also a privileged platform of expression for this niche opinion driven by the Gramscian leitmotif of overthrowing the “cultural hegemony” of liberalism. RT makes it possible to recreate a metapolitical solidarity, contributing to the structuring of a militant, partisan, media, and even academic network whose horizon aligns, with astonishing accuracy, with the aims and global ambitions of the Russian state.

Conclusions

The complex intertwining of legacies from the Soviet past, the search for alternatives to the historical monopoly of the United States, and a liberal experience perceived as harmful opened the space for a dialogue between Russia and Latin America that can be described as counter-hegemonic. This exchange aims to demonstrate the failure of liberalism by recounting the confluence of several sources of rejection and contestation of a model that, everywhere, has sought to bend the sovereign will of “peoples” and “nations” in order to dominate them. Also, despite apparent ideological incompatibility, the political culture and intellectual construction of the Latin American left have made possible a dialogue with the multipolar but conservative vision of the world advanced by Moscow.

This exchange obeys less to a strict alignment of political positions than to a convergence of diverse narratives which shape the political coherence of illiberalism. It is a question of producing a shared sense of the world order from a collection of experiences, rejections, and political responses that have emerged in very different contexts yet all converge on the same goal: the overcoming of liberalism as the key to reading the world order and the repositioning of sovereignty as the cornerstone of a decentralized order.

This dimension has progressively become the keystone of the rapprochement observed between Russia and Latin America since the beginning of the 2000s. It refers more to the objectives of international projection of Russian foreign policy than to a strategic imperative that would aim to rebalance power relations with the United States in the two countries’ respective zones of influence. Similarly, given the absence of dogmatic elements such as existed during the Soviet period, this influence does not aim to promote a specific alternative political model. If Russia’s support for

⁴⁸ Estéban Ponce De León, “A Glimpse into RT’s Latin American Audience,” DFRLab (Digital Forensic Lab), August 7, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-glimpse-into-rt-s-latin-american-audience-487d52bed507>.

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the governments of the Bolivarian axis is widely acknowledged, it hardly produced the conditions for their authoritarian turn or the radicalism that has been inscribed in their political programs since they came to power.

Conversely, Russia has taken advantage of the general Latin American situation to increase or maintain its position. In their weakness, the diversity of ties that Russia has with the rest of the Latin American countries, responding to diverse interests, also proves this state of affairs. In the absence of rigid dogmatic content that would underpin this counter-hegemonic dialogue, the narrative foundations that have shaped relations between Russia and the Spanishspeaking world to date are likely to change. Until the beginning of the 2020s, it was the political culture of the left that was most conducive to Russian influence. But the rapprochement between Putin and Bolsonaro since the BRICS meeting of 2020, or the hints of the Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele about the election of pro-Russian separatists in the face of “Ukrainian fascists who are waging war,”⁴⁹ demonstrate the plausibility of a change.

Once again, neither the nature of the regimes nor the equivalence of the political ideas gives a precise idea of the anchoring of this proximity. That being said, the constants in this equation, whatever the regime, are best understood in terms of the meta-narratives we have made explicit: (1) critique of market democracy; (2) critique of cultural-colonial liberalism; and (3) geopolitical critique of liberalism. Since these are the keys to a reading that can be transposed to other contexts, we can describe this dialogue as illiberalism and the various political and diplomatic formulas that produce links between countries as an illiberal agreement.

The future of relations between Russia and Latin American countries is, more than ever, foggy. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine, as well as the internal changes in Latin American politics more than twenty years after the rise of the “pink tide,” seems to announce a new phase of stagnation in the absence of substantive initiatives. . On the one hand, the arrival or return of left-wing governments after 2018 does not seem to have changed the traditional posture of this group with regard to Russia. Chilean President Gabriel Boric is pursuing the same cautious line as his left-wing predecessor Michelle Bachelet, after the parenthesis of Sebastian Piñera from the traditionally Atlanticist right. Conversely, the governments of the Bolivarian axis maintain their loyalty to the Kremlin, offering Russia solutions commensurate with their ability to help it circumvent Western sanctions. The Bolivian government of Luis Arce, for instance, now intends to use the ruble as a transaction currency with Russia.⁵⁰ Along similar lines, Da Silva’s triumphant return to the Planalto Palace in Brasilia marks the continuity of the good relations developed by Brazil and Russia since the 2000s, both bilaterally and multilaterally within the BRICS.

The initiative to create a club of countries for peace in the context of the war in Ukraine, which aims to bring the belligerents together around a negotiating table under Brazilian mediation to quickly end the conflict, is flawed due to its lack of attention to the military balance of forces on the ground. De facto, this diplomatic mobilization to put an end to the conflict, despite its pacifist and neutral façade, heavily favors Russia⁵¹ and views the West as guilty of not seeking peace because it

49 @nayibbukele, “En Ucrania, pro rusos hacen elecciones mientras fascistas les disparan. Queda claro quienes son los defensores de la democracia,” May 11, 2014, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/465700978394529792?lang=fr>.

50 “Rossiia i Boliviia nachali raschety v natsvaliutakh,” *RIA Novosti*, February 14, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230214/natsvaliuty-1851951570.html>.

51 “Moscow Analyzes Brazil’s Peace Initiatives on Ukraine—Foreign Ministry,” *TASS*, February 23, 2023, <https://tass.com/russias-foreign-policy/1580875>.

has given arms to Ukraine. This mobilization seems to pursue two main objectives: not to tarnish da Silva's public image as a paladin of democracy, conferred by Western countries due to his victory over Jair Bolsonaro; and to find an optimal diplomatic niche that allows Brazil to keep one foot in the world of Western multilateralism and the other in that of the BRICS, no member of which has condemned the Russian aggression.

The Brazilian president revealed his position in a response to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz when the latter asked him to support the Ukrainian war effort by sending ammunition. Da Silva responded: "I think the reason for the war between Russia and Ukraine also needs to be clearer. Is it because of NATO? Is it because of territorial claims? Is it because of entry into Europe? The world has little information about that. [...] Brazil has no interest in handing over munitions that can be used in the war between Ukraine and Russia. We are a country committed to peace."⁵² The Brazilian initiative has involved other Latin American left-wing leaders, among them the Argentinian Fernandez and new Colombian president Gustavo Petro, as well as such Europeans as the former leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbin; the leader of La France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Mélenchon; and the general secretary of Spain's Podemos, Ione Bellarra.⁵³ That being said, the extreme right-wing lines increasingly present in Latin American politics could constitute the new avatar of this illiberal agreement with Russia.

⁵² "Brazil's Lula Snubs Olaf Scholz with Ukraine War Remarks," *Politico*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-mercosur-olaf-scholz/>.

⁵³ "Guerre en Ukraine: 'Nous appelons à redoubler d'efforts diplomatiques pour établir un cessez-le-feu,'" *Le Monde*, February 10, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2023/02/10/guerre-en-ukraine-nous-appelons-a-redoubler-d-efforts-diplomatiques-pour-etablir-un-cessez-le-feu_6161361_3232.html.