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Democratic Resilience Facing Autocratic Influence in Latin America: Recommendations on the EU's Potentialities and Challenges¹

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Executive Summary

The conclusions of the Conference for the Future of Europe show a strong commitment to the global support of democracy. Nevertheless, in the year that has passed since, the policy of the European Union towards the problem of democracy in Latin America continues to be erratic and ineffective in the fight against domestic and foreign illiberal influence. This discussion paper analyzes the challenges of democratic resilience in Latin America, assesses the EU's response to this, and issues recommendations for its governing bodies to improve the focus and quality of the aid that is already offered to the region's struggling democratic governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) fighting autocratic regimes.

As it becomes clear after the recent apparent shift in EU policy towards Latin America's autocratic regimes, today it is imperative that democratic forces within the Union implement the necessary policies to restrain the spread of illiberalism in Latin America but also remain resolute in the wake of a renewed call from domestic illiberal actors to soften the restrictions already in place.

Introduction

Latin America and Europe are part of the Global West, and the former is also part of the Global South: two regions with shared democratic histories, values, and experiences, which have faced in the past (and even today) the incidence of global and regional authoritarianism. In Latin America, the complicity between global autocracies and local regimes has amplified the reach and presence of Russia and China, the key global illiberal agents. This autocratic synergy that has been built is strengthened due to the weakness of Latin American economies and institutions: frequent economic crises and instability have created the perfect environment for expanding the illiberal and autocratic influence. Moreover, even as Latin American public opinion, media, and academia are broad and diverse, the overall commitment to liberal democracy continues to be flawed.

In this context, it is important to revisit one of the thematic proposals created by the Conference for the Future of Europe: EU in the World. This discussion paper aims to share some ideas from a Latin American perspective about how the EU's potentialities for action in terms of cooperation for the strengthening of democracy, the fight against disinformation, and the empowerment of civil society can be put into practical work, and, consequently, which challenges must be surmounted.

The issues selected for reflection are:

- The EU's role in countering disinformation and propaganda ("The EU as a Global Actor for Peace and Security")
- Coordinated EU diplomacy and sanctions ("EU Relations with Third Countries and Global Engagement")
- The importance of unity in EU policy towards autocratic and hybrid regimes ("The EU's Role in Fostering Peace and Stability")

¹ Paper presented at the Parliament for the Future of Europe (Prague, October 15), pre-event of the Forum 2000 Conference.

It also becomes necessary to highlight some valuable ideas from the document on the European Union's projection to the world. In particular, the benefit of EU countries speaking with one voice in international relations, which allows them to make greater use of their collective political and economic weight, acting in a unified way, without individual member states dividing the Union through **inappropriate bilateral responses**. Just this year, one-on-one relations have led countries such as Spain to advocate against Nicolás Maduro's murderous regime in Venezuela, and Portugal to host with honors a dictator such as Miguel Díaz-Canel, actions that are nonetheless embedded in the European Socialist parties' long-standing support for these regimes.

Illiberal Influence in Latin America

Even as the state relations of some European countries with Latin American autocracies are already problematic, this must not turn the focus away from the main arenas where democracy is being debated in the region: the informational and civic spaces. They can be conceived as networks and environments in which individuals and collectives exercise their right to free information, expression, and mobilization, seeking public engagement under the protection of a democratic rule of law. The Latin American informational and civic spaces are threatened by global autocratic influences and the consequential collaborations with illiberal actors even inside democratic regimes.² The activists and CSOs that protect and promote democratic institutions, their coexistence, and their agenda, are still called upon—in the face of this authoritarian offensive—to define their challenges and opportunities as pragmatically and accurately as possible.

The exemplifying case of how the appeals of these CSOs are ignored because of a failed policy towards an agent of autocratic promotion is the long-lived Cuban Communist regime. The policy of the EU towards Cuba, Russia's main ally in the region and the most consolidated autocratic regime with broad regional and global influence, is ambiguous and counterproductive. Measured in parameters such as population, GDP, or armed forces, Cuba would seem insignificant, but its diplomatic, political, disinformation, and intelligence influence is very extensive and, in some areas, has more capacities (e.g., networks of so-called "solidarity groups" or embassies around the world) than some developed countries.

Moreover, the Cuban state has a key role in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the UN, where it has been ratified by the Human Rights Council. The active role of the Cuban government in strengthening authoritarian regimes in Venezuela and Nicaragua, the failure of a common front against Russia, and the desire to improve relations with Europe in relaunching its relations with Latin America are all part of the purposeful creation and dissemination of Cuban disinformation (and its Bolivarian allies), which has been amplifying the Russian narrative in the last couple of years.

The response of Brussels to the continuity of this authoritarian status quo has been to maintain the Cooperation Agreement with Cuba, while—at the same time—partially sanctioning Venezuela and Nicaragua. This is an incoherent policy considering that Havana continues to act as an autocratic promoter, that it maintains more political prisoners (more than one thousand) than the rest of Latin American countries combined, and that Cuban state agencies are expanding the repression, including transnational, to which the promoters of democracy in the region have been subjected.

Given the regional relevance of the Cuban influence, the lack of a proper understanding of the benefits the Cuban regime gets from its relationship with the EU is a considerable obstacle to the fulfillment of the Union's commitment to global democratic governance, as adding on counterproductive practical and normative impact on the objectives and principles defended by the EU in the first place. In this sense, the Cuban regime is acting, in a wider range, against the objectives and projection of the EU: specifically, its role in countering disinformation and propaganda.

² European Civic Forum. <https://civic-forum.eu/civic-space>

Nonetheless, the focus cannot remain just within Latin America, as the leading disseminators of disinformation against democracy are global actors, mainly Russia and China. In recent years, the Chinese influence in Latin American economies has increased, allowing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to expand its grasp on the local democratic establishments.³ In the Latin American context, the enormous human and material resources of the Chinese regime—which include investments, credits, personnel training, and cultural propaganda—serve to leverage its agenda in the region, seducing not only its traditional allies, but also parties, businesspeople, and opinion-makers close to the liberal democratic orbit. These ways of exerting influence are reinforced due to their nature: they tend to rely more on local stakeholders instead of formal foreign representations or institutions.

In this sense, the corrosive capital investments combined with a lack of awareness of what it can mean for democratic regimes is a major threat to the resilience of the rule of law in Latin America. Its national governments are now more than ever linked to the CCP and at the same time, a large portion of the public remains vastly unaware of its activities.⁴ In some cases—like Peru and Argentina—there is an asymmetric relation with China based on ideology that furthers the economic dependence on the latter, which makes some Latin American democratic regimes even more vulnerable to foreign autocratic collaboration threats.

In Russia's case, although it has less of a direct presence in Latin American academia than China does (e.g., 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. This is mainly because the advancement of Russia's strategic communications in Latin America has been met with relatively little opposition.⁵ One of the factors behind the success of these networks is the public's lack of understanding of the true nature of Moscow's interest in the regional informational space. As an example, many Latin Americans perceive media such as *Russia Today* or *Sputnik* as a simple expression of informational pluralism and not as mouthpieces of the Putinist regime.

Moreover, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the Russian media ecosystem has hit new milestones as a source of disinformation for the Latin American population, as its discourses have become more obviously biased. In a recent investigation led by GAPAC,⁶ the official narratives of Russia and Venezuela were identified as converging in the news coverage and editorials of media such as *Russia Today* and *Telesur*, which have been converted into vehicles of disinformation towards the entire Latin American region.

This shows that global autocratic powers take advantage of historical paths, cultural affinities, institutional similarities, and social sympathies in the target countries that are useful for the advancement of their agendas. Their practices have converged on the progressive elimination of democratic institutions and actors, such as opposition parties, media, and CSOs. In parallel, these regimes have ensured a strong state presence in their economies thanks to practices such as clientelism and neo-patrimonial relationships, through which state capture has become evident and further cemented the autocratic hold on society.

Misunderstanding the Approach: How the EU Misjudges Latin America's Illiberal Agents

In the face of this context, it is imperative not to wait for it to worsen to start learning from activists and CSOs in the field, gathering information to establish a stable and strong network of **transnational democratic solidarity**. The idea that “this is not going to happen here”, which sometimes hinders the Global North's approach towards illiberal

³ Pedrosa, Fernando, Armando Chaguaceda, María Isabel Puerta, and Max Povse. “China y Latinoamérica. Influencia autoritaria y resiliencia democrática”. 2022.

⁴ IRI Center for Insights in Survey Research. “Citizen Polling on CCP Influence in LAC Region”. 2023.

⁵ Rouvinski, Vladimir. “The Misleading Truths of Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America”, *Global Security Review*, vol. 2, article 5, 2022.

⁶ Armando Chaguaceda, Johanna Cilano Pelaez, and María Isabel Puerta, “Illiberal Narratives in Latin America: Russian and Allied Media as Vehicles of Autocratic Cooperation,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 3 no. 2 (Summer 2023), 111-123

⁷ Chipkin, I., Swilling, M., Bhorat, H., Qobo, M., Duma, S., Mondli, L., Peter, C., Buthelezi, M., Friedenstien, H. and Prins, N., 2018. *Shadow state: The politics of state capture*. NYU Press.

influence in Latin America, is a complacent one that has been disproved by decades of autocratization processes in the region and by the impact of citizen actions on re-democratization efforts.

On top of that, and although each case has its particularities, there is no place for cultural, ideological, ethnic, or geopolitical separation between Europe and Latin America. If dictatorships cooperate so effectively from a state-driven perspective, there is no reason European and Latin American democrats cannot do it, not only from civil society but also from their democratic state apparatuses and processes of regional integration. To this end, it is proper to underscore the difficulties already experienced when conducting activities on autocratic powers' illiberal influence on Latin America when setting up the European aid policy for them. Among these:

- The role of militant scholars in the promotion of disinformation, who are often invited to European universities to continue spreading it.
- The apathy of young people towards political phenomena, and the project limitations derived from this—as well as from the lack of interest in network engagement that goes on through an older generation's perspective of politics.
- The ubiquity of illiberal discourses due to the proliferation of virtual public spaces with the rise of modern technologies that do not seem to be a priority in most state's agendas.

These structural choke points conspire against the success of awareness-raising projects and point to the need to adapt the support strategies accordingly from the various places of institutional and social responsibility within the EU. To this goal, reviewing the negative and positive lessons learned from national cases and the specific methods in which illiberal agents operate is important. The purpose of the joint efforts between Latin American democratic activists and their European counterparts, especially within the EU governance apparatus, is to understand and build, through deliberation, better ways for democratic actors such as public intellectuals, civic activists, CSOs, public servants, and politicians to:

1. React effectively against autocratic collaboration in the information space and take the initiative for the preservation;
2. Strengthen the informational and civic spaces as well as, in a broader sense, democratic resilience.

In this context, acting effectively within a world of highly fluid, changing, and complex political ideas and practices has proved that it requires information, innovation, and articulation. **Information** refers to an adequate knowledge of the context and the awareness of the illiberal regimes' weaknesses. **Innovation** is needed to understand the best approaches and practices to defend the information space and strengthen democratic resilience. Finally, **articulation** is a sine qua non for CSOs to function as a coordinated network with a plan, instead of as a collection of reactive and fragmented campaigns.

Recommendations for an Integral Plan on Latin American Democratic Resilience

From all this, it becomes apparent that the EU as a supranational entity (but also its member states and its political ecosystem in general) is still suffering from an impervious lack of understanding of Latin America's struggle with illiberalism: sometimes because of a biased support for its autocracies that are self-proclaimed left-wing regimes, other times because of a narrow-minded diplomacy that tries to impose European standards on Global South problems. From these assessments, there are some recommendations that, if implemented, will help towards the bettering of democratic resilience in this critical region:

- Among the current recipients of EU democracy-oriented aid in Latin America, **strengthening the funding of the political center**—made up of established democratic political parties, new citizen movements, CSOs, and individuals—would benefit from being fostered and strengthened both in ideological support but also in direct financing of donors of the scale of the Union. In this sense, the tools provided to confront the illiberal threats seeking to polarize the political spectrum through the radicalization of left- and right-wing populist actors need to be useful, but also to show proven effectiveness in the field.

- In terms of political media influence, it is necessary to work with national governments to **improve the quality of TV programming** through European outlets such as France 24, Deutsche Welle, RAI, RTVE, and Euronews (among others), combining programs that provide critical analysis of the socioeconomic and political problems that affect average Latin Americans with attractive entertainment programs, and away of issues that are central for the EU agenda, but not for Latin American democracies.
- 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 on social media platforms. This requires creative advice from multidisciplinary teams and the permanent monitoring of public opinion and its demands, a goal that can be easily implemented by the EU apparatus.
- In this sense, the most sustainable way to guarantee the integrity of the information space in the face of authoritarian threats requires transcending **the important—albeit structurally limited—agendas of public advocacy and promoting the global articulation of democracy-oriented CSOs**. If the accumulated problems that face Latin America's fragile democracies (such as social cohesion, sustainable and inclusive development, the provision of public goods and services, transparency, and the rule of law, among many others) are not resolved, these democracies will always be vulnerable to the seduction of internal populism and the sharp or soft influence of foreign autocracies.
- Moreover, it is necessary to **understand in a differentiated way the extension and depth of the damage caused by autocratic cooperation** in the suppression of freedoms and media in the informational space. To this end, the central variable to consider is the type of political regime in each case and its level of social control within the country, as well as its capacity to influence externally. This is because the challenges of populist governments (e.g., Mexico, among many others), competitive authoritarian regimes (El Salvador), or closed dictatorships (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) are not the same, and most European diplomacy struggles to identify their differences and therefore to act accordingly to each case's particular needs. The challenges also vary in democratic regimes, depending on how strong the support for democracy is within public opinion.
- There is a need to refocus the priorities of the aid to **avoid the imposition of agendas by global actors with political or financial influence** (such as the European agencies, countries, and parties) that have in some cases acted to the detriment of urgent local needs. Nonetheless, it is not a question of oscillating between an extreme localist approach from the recipient side against an imposed globalist priority of the donors. Instead, the challenge is to build strong alliances based on values and minimal common agendas that can have a direct impact on democratic quality in Latin American countries.
- Finally, from the case brought forward in this paper, it highlights the necessity of **strengthening the EU's ability to impose sanctions on states, governments, entities, groups, and organizations—as well as individuals—that do not comply with democratic principles and erode the liberal international order**. The importance of a more effective and unified policy towards autocratic and hybrid regimes and developed partnerships with CSOs in such countries must be underscored.

In summation, the above ideas are, in all cases, practical and normative proposals of undoubted value for the global projection of Europe and for the stability of a just, peaceful, and democratic world order that can be easily implemented in the different institutional spaces of EU governance with a measurable positive effect in peripheral regions such as Latin America. It is necessary to start implementing them as soon as possible, given that not only the regional autocracies seem to be enjoying a relaxation of the measures imposed against them by the Global North, but also because the main global illiberal agents, Russia and China, continue to strengthen their grip on the region's already fragile informational space.

If there is not a coordinated response to this threat from a key global actor such as the EU, then many institutions and people that are actively fighting to develop a better, more solid democracy in Latin America will be left alone in their darkest hour. It is necessary for a serious commitment from all European actors to the principles of global democracy, and a humble approach to the hard task of supporting them to continue building together the democratic resilience needed to face these times of autocratic resurgence.



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