

Democratization



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Rumor mill: Venezuela in global disinformation and propaganda networks

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“A pluricentric and multipolar world has already emerged”, stated Nicolás Maduro last June from the Simón Bolívar International Airport –standing on a red carpet, surrounded by officials in suits and soldiers with red berets, and facing windows covered with his and Hugo Chávez’s faces-. “All are emerging countries of the new world that is being built”. Maduro was returning from a ‘Eurasian’ tour in which he visited various countries with postmodern kings and autocrats between the Maghreb and Central Asia, as if they were members of a supposed Autocratic International. Just a few months earlier, Russian tanks had crossed the flowered steppes of Donbass in what seemed to be a bet on the end of the unipolar world: a stab at the liberal order, with its multilateral organizations and portfolios with English words, and the end of the history of Reagan and the Bushes and the Clintons.

By August, the Venezuelan government –as if spitting on any approach to the Western sphere, constantly pinching it with mentions of “democratization” and “human rights”– irreverently proclaimed Barquisimeto as the host of the seventh edition of the International Army Games: a military competition organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense for a universe of client countries, friendly anti-Western titans, and Soviet nostalgics orbiting around

Vladimir Putin's imperial dreams. With enormous rifles and colored berets and tanks with vibrant camouflage, soldiers from a handful of countries from Asia, socialist Latin America, and the former Soviet Union competed alongside Venezuelan soldiers in a sort of illiberal video game brought to reality.

But Venezuela's flirtations with the "pluricentric and multipolar world" –to the realms of the Eurasian steppes, soberly rejecting the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic– have not been limited merely to military games or Russia Today-inspired speeches: they also manifest in the fluctuations of disinformation and digital propaganda, aspects of our Black Mirror in which Venezuela has become a spearhead. In fact, the media of the chavismo communication apparatus have become content replicators for the Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik, which have correspondents, social media accounts with massive reach, international television channels, and hundreds of employees. According to a report¹ by Transparencia Internacional, *EsPaja*, *Probox*, and *Cazadores de Fake News*, Venezuelan state or pro-chavismo media went from mentioning around 20 articles from RT and Sputnik per month in 2019 to over 500 by mid-2022.

According to the investigation, the promotion of Russian narratives preceded the invasion: "This came from the momentum that the whole Sputnik V [vaccine] issue had during the pandemic, where the [public media] information about vaccines was replicated from RT and Sputnik, the agency", says Victor Amaya, journalist and editorial coordinator from *TalCual*. "There was obviously an interest in saying that the best vaccine is the Russian one, which was the one they were finally going to acquire here in Venezuela". *La Hojilla*, says Amaya, tried to compare the effectiveness of the

1 <https://transparenciave.org/rusia-y-venezuela-aliados-para-desinformar/>

Sputnik vaccine against the American Pfizer vaccine. He also explains that there was “that mess” surrounding the English AstraZeneca vaccine when the Venezuelan government did not authorize it in Venezuela and refused to receive them through the Covax mechanism promoted by the WHO.

The use of the vaccine as soft power in Latin America was not limited to Venezuela. “It aligned Venezuela with Mexico and aligned Venezuela with Argentina, which was in charge not only of translating all the scientific materials of the Sputnik V into Spanish but also announced that a vaccine production plant would be installed in Argentina”, explains Amaya. However, the plant has not been completed yet, and the second dose of Sputnik vaccines never arrived in Venezuela.

However, the replication of content from RT and Sputnik began to skyrocket from November 2022 –when Russian troops began to position themselves, like a ring, around the edges of Ukraine. The way the information is replicated by state media or media close to the government apparatus– especially *Telesur*, *VTV*, and *La Iguana*, but also *Últimas Noticias* and *Venezuela News*– is “practically a copy and paste”, says Amaya. But the use of these Russian platforms as primary sources of information, explains the journalist, is not limited to repeating Russian narratives about their foreign policy: “The content produced by RT is widely used in official media as an international news agency, covering what happens in France, what happens in Europe, and even what happens in the United States”, he explains, “[Russian media] has been used to talk even about Juan Guaidó”. According to the journalist, this strategy seeks to “validate” pro-officialist narratives by framing them as information from a prestigious international news agency, similar to Reuters, AP, or AFP.

Additionally, public channels such as *VTV*, *Tves*, *Vive TV*, and *Conciencia TV* have broadcast emblematic programs from RT, Russian children's programs, and even a documentary produced in Russia about the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia in the nineties. Also, the television program *La Hojilla* –historically one of the most incisive instruments of chavismo to discredit its opponents and promote polarization as a tool for political mobilization– regularly reads headlines taken from RT at least 3 to 5 times per average broadcast, according to the *Transparencia* and anti-disinformation media report, between June and July 2022.

The pro-Russian narrative in Venezuelan government media is clear: the Bucha massacre, for example, is only portrayed on *Telesur* as a “false episode”, a “provocation by Ukraine”, and a “massacre of civilians with the participation of human rights organizations”. On the website of *Venezolana de Televisión*, the massacre is described as a “Ukraine setup” and an “alleged massacre”. In contrast, it denounces Ukraine's attacks against civilians in the “Republic of Donetsk” (a Russian puppet state in occupied Ukraine not recognized internationally), celebrates Russian military victories, blames Ukraine for blocking peace negotiations, and speaks of “genocide by Kiev”. Even *Últimas Noticias*, a private media outlet bought by entrepreneurs close to chavismo, talks about a “genocide in Donbás” carried out by Ukraine as one of the reasons that motivated Putin's “special military operation”.

The purpose of this replication of narratives is to “generate a discursive line that is somehow aligned with Russian interests in Latin America and around the globe, but also with the interests of Russian allies”, says Amaya, such as Venezuela or Nicaragua: in other words, a rejection of the Western narrative and the reports from major media outlets of liberal democracies. Additionally,

coordinating disinformation and propaganda is part of a larger approach between Russia and Venezuela: both countries have signed more than 260 bilateral agreements, including some in 2022 and 2023. In fact, in October 2021, an interministerial agreement on communications was established between Russia and Venezuela during the XV Russia-Venezuela High-Level Commission. However, Amaya explains, that “the terms of the agreements that have been signed, including the communications part, are not public”.

Furthermore, a sanctioned Venezuela also serves as a narrative instrument for a sanctioned Russia: “Russia is also a sanctioned country, Russia is also a country that faces the United States and the West, and Russia is a country with significant oil business”, explains Amaya, “So there are certain similarities in the way both countries are understood” in Russian and Venezuelan media. Even “critical” reports from Russian media outlets like Lenta resort to inaccuracies and biased views about Venezuela that align with the narrative promoted by chavismo and its allies: “In the 1990s, large oligarchs shared power in Venezuela. Even then, the economy depended heavily on resource extraction, and all income from oil sales was divided among the political elites. Corruption and nepotism flourished in the country, social stratification was monstrous, and ordinary citizens were poor. The situation began to change when the charismatic Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998”, reads one of the reports from Lenta.

In fact, explains Amaya, there is a sort of symbiosis between the media apparatus of chavismo and those of Russia. For example, RT uses public buildings in Venezuela –such as the studios of *Venezolana de Televisión*– for broadcasting, and their correspondents Erika Ortega Sanoja and Jessica Sosa were former members of *Venezolana de Televisión* and *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*.

There is also no pretense of objectivity, which is typical of Western agencies: Ortega Sanoja was elected as a substitute deputy for the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela).

According to an anonymous journalistic source who worked at Telesur until 2014, consulted in the report by *Transparencia* and other organizations, “Telesur represented the great center of approach for other countries to reach Latin America. There was not so much a journalistic interest, but rather the construction of the relationship. In this way, Telesur served as a catapult for the penetration of channels like RT or Arab media like Al Mayadeen”. Additionally, Telesur received Russian training courses and content as compensation.

Our America, our disinformation

The dissemination of pro-officialist news and narratives operates within a connected ecosystem of international media that quote each other or replicate articles from one another. This ecosystem², dating back to at least 2003, includes media outlets such as *La Pluma* in Spain, *El Popular* in Uruguay, *The Grayzone* in the Anglophone world, *Red de Solidaridad con la Venezuela Revolucionaria* in Sweden, *Debate Plural* in the Dominican Republic, *Orinoco Tribune*, *Declassified UK* in the United Kingdom, and the government-affiliated *Misión Verdad*. In fact, according to a report from the University of Oxford, Facebook identifies Venezuela as one of the seven countries engaged in digital influence operations in other nations and as part of a group of countries with cyber-troops of “high capacity”.

2 <https://proboxve.org/en-US/publicacion/portales-de-la-mentira-como-es-el-enjambre-internacional-de-medios-independientes-al-servicio-de-las-narrativas-chavistas>

Such troops operate by distributing “content based on orders from the Ministry of Information, aligning many official and unofficial accounts, some of which are managed in a somewhat automated manner”, explains Amaya. For instance, these accounts are given a daily content goal, and many of them are currently paid through bonuses from *Sistema Patria*, a system of payments and state benefits established in 2016.

According to an investigation coordinated by *Transparencia*, *EsPaja*, *ProBox*, and *Medianálisis*, this penetration into the online realm dates back to the beginning of Nicolás Maduro’s presidency when they sought to counter the perceived dominance of opposition and critical sectors on social media. In fact, in 2013, Maduro called for the creation of a “Bolivarian Twitter”, and two years later, a *Red Patria* with alternatives to WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter called *Nido*, *Colibrí*, and *Cardenalito* was established. By 2017, a manual of action for an “army of trolls” of the Bolivarian Revolution promoted by the *Gran Misión Justicia Socialista* had been leaked. This army was divided into squads, platoons, companies, battalions, and brigades, with the latter subdivision consisting of up to 500 people and 11,500 accounts. The success of the Venezuelan government’s digital troops has been such that operations of Castro counter-propaganda were detected in Cuba, surrounding the protests of 2021, “which replicate many of the methods we have studied here,” says Amaya.

In fact, as explained by Iris Puyosa, an expert in information operations and senior research fellow at the Atlantic Council, coordinated operations from Venezuela have become frequent in Latin America. “There is growing evidence of coordinated campaigns from Venezuela in various processes in Latin America, both in protests and electoral processes”, explains Puyosa. According to the expert, these coordinated account operations from Venezuela

have been observed at times when certain governments leave power for different reasons, such as the departure of Evo Morales in Bolivia or Pedro Castillo in Peru. Additionally, Puyosa points out that similar operations have been recorded in Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile. “In some cases, they support their allies, while in other cases, they attack the adversaries of their allies”, she says.

Although this is an ongoing activity, it is unknown whether it is increasing, but its detection is. Furthermore, there are other cases in which Venezuelan actors are involved, but the operations appear to be coordinated from other countries. This is not an isolated phenomenon: according to a 2022 investigation by the digital observatory *Probox*, Venezuela coordinates its disinformation campaigns with other authoritarian regimes in the region. According to the research, 22 hashtags trended simultaneously in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, with more than 3,799,612 tweets. “The coordination between these countries is not only military or ideological but also on social media”, explained *Probox* Director María Virginia Marín to the media outlet *Divergentes*.

And the digital penetration by the Venezuelan state is not limited to Latin America. According to data from Twitter Elections Integrity, Venezuelan digital operations during the 2016 US presidential campaign –and the month after the elections– had more exposure than operations from China and Iran. However, the operations from Russia were more significant than those of the other three countries combined.

The Illiberals Club

Although information from Venezuela’s official media occasionally appears in pro-Iranian or sympathizing media

outlets of the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah, such as Al Mayadeen or Al Manar, the pro-Chavista or closely government-linked narrative is not as frequent in agencies from other authoritarian countries or groups that proclaim themselves anti-Western or anti-capitalist. “China has the Xinhua agency”, explains Amaya, “but it does not have the same quantity, the same presence, the same impact, or the same deployment in public media as RT or Sputnik”. Even the Turkish agency Anadolu publishes content that is not precisely favorable to Chavismo. According to Amaya, the replication of Venezuelan state media by agencies of other friendly countries beyond Russia has been limited to information relevant to those countries, such as state visits of Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

However, there seem to be cases of cooperation between Venezuela and its international allies in propaganda or digital disinformation campaigns. For example, members and sympathizers of Turkey’s ruling party, the Justice and Development Party, to which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan belongs and which is close to Chavismo, coordinated content on Twitter in early 2019 with Venezuelan government officials, such as Jorge Rodríguez, as part of a campaign titled #WeAreMaduro in support of Maduro after Juan Guaidó’s presidential proclamation. “They tweeted the same things, retweeted each other”, says Puyosa, “It was a truly spectacular campaign”.

However, there are possible indications of coordination between Venezuela and other authoritarian regimes to digitally interfere in foreign electoral processes and political conflicts. In fact, Venezuela’s digital meddling through bots and trolls in the politics of other countries has been documented. These accounts “amplify, for example, videos they have planted on YouTube or these pseudonews websites that have false content”, explains

Puyosa, “In other cases, they engage in conversations about current topics with extremist arguments and insults, attacking political actors, journalists, activists, generating an environment of toxicity and polarization” beyond seeking a real impact on electoral dynamics.

In this way, more internal conflict is generated in other countries with the intention of destabilizing them: “They increase polarization, create an atmosphere of tension, sow doubts about the veracity of circulating information, and foster mistrust in the media and political actors”, says Puyosa. The result, by amplifying extremist positions and undermining the possibility of discussions seeking consensus or “civilized disagreements”, is a lack of trust in the political institutions of those countries and a view that other political factions are enemies.

In an operation documented by Twitter’s Elections Integrity Datasets focused on the 2018 United States midterm elections, during which 764 Venezuelan accounts pretending to be American were identified aiming to encourage polarization in the United States. “There were MAGA [Make American Great Again] accounts, and another set of accounts were Black Lives Matter”, says Puyosa, “It’s the same strategy that has been used in Venezuela for a long time, creating accounts that are from extreme opposition and accounts from the Chavismo facing off on Twitter”. However, it is noteworthy that Iranian and Russian accounts were also identified “doing similar things, but it is not clear if there is coordination”, she adds.

In the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, there was also evidence of digital coordination between accounts managed by Venezuelans and Catalan separatists, explains the expert. “The same company that created the VenApp”, a Venezuelan government

application, ran the campaign, says Puyosa. In Honduras, she says there was also evidence of coordination between Venezuelan actors and the current president Xiomara Castro's campaign.

Furthermore, in 2019, the Chilean government conducted a study analyzing the messages spread on social media during the protests in Chile that year. The study concluded that many of these messages originated from Moscow and Caracas. However, according to Puyosa, this case is "quite controversial" because the conclusions reached by a private company hired by the Chilean government, a Chilean university, and independent researchers have been different from each other regarding whether there was a coordinated effort and what the impact of that campaign was. "There is no consensus that allows to assert with certainty if there was a significant presence of Venezuelan operations there", she explains.

Venezuela is fixed – in India

Coordinated operations by Venezuelan actors also seek to promote other types of narratives linked to the Venezuelan government. After months of rumors fueled by random music accounts on social media, the US media outlet MarketWatch published a press release on April 25th of last year announcing that "Coldplay will perform for the first time in Venezuela". According to the publication, the concert was being produced by Solid Show Productions and would take place on September 28th at Hacienda Santa Teresa, a tourist estate owned by Ron Santa Teresa. The press release even quoted Juan Carlos Araujo, president of Solid Show. But there was a catch: Araujo had been arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 20 years in prison for drug trafficking and money laundering. Solid Show had been inactive for seven years. Santa Teresa soon discredited the news. Why did MarketWatch, a

prestigious financial website owned by Dow Jones & Company, publish this obvious hoax?

The truth is that MarketWatch took it from COMTEX, an online news distributor, which had taken it from Vehement Media: an Indian press release distribution service. In fact, the city mentioned in the press release was Coimbatore, in southern India. The media contact was someone named Pranesh Balaji, who works at Amazon Web Services and lives in Coimbatore according to his LinkedIn. However, the details of the fake press release were quite Venezuelan: it mentioned *TicketMundo* and the local band *Tomates Fritos*. Why would a press release distributor in Coimbatore publish a press release clearly written by a Venezuelan about a concert in Aragua?

Of course, the possibility of a mere joke is always there, but one has to wonder if the intentions behind the press release were political, in line with the new Madurista mantra of “economic recovery”. The press release, in fact, mentioned the non-existent concert as a “landmark event in the country’s history” that would attract attendees from neighboring countries. Venezuela is fixed!

In fact, this narrative of recovery and patriotism has been promoted by accounts and “journalists” who do not have explicit ties to the government or state media. For example, self-proclaimed journalist Vanessa Ortiz –who apparently has no explicit ties to any website or media outlet– posted videos on Twitter to demonstrate that the country is not under an alleged authoritarian regime. “Every weekend, Maduro’s ‘regime’ ‘represses’ Venezuelans”, she tweeted with a TikTok video showing trucks and people partying on a Venezuelan beach.

And as demonstrated by the publication of a press release in English or the messages directed at foreigners seeking to invisibilize the existence of an autocratic regime in Venezuela, the “Venezuela is fixed” message seems to be also targeting people abroad: part of the government’s propaganda and disinformation machinery to promote positive narratives around Venezuela, which has gained the image of an economic and humanitarian disaster in the world, and cleaning up Maduro’s government’s image at a time when it desperately seeks international legitimacy.

The Caribbean Series held in Caracas, for example, was used to promote this narrative on Twitter: according to research by the digital observatory *Probox*, while teachers and the public sector were organizing protests in the streets, the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information and its Twitter troops positioned a series of hashtags that promoted a narrative of “enjoyment and national joy” –at a moment of international sports relevance, with the eyes of the region on the new stadium *La Rinconada*, and with hundreds of tourists from Caribbean countries in Venezuela– to the point that 96% of the tweets about the Caribbean Series came from possible automated accounts.

In fact, the Caribbean Series is featured in another iconic episode of official propaganda around the “Venezuela is fixed” narrative: the use of supposed English-speaking journalists, created with artificial intelligence software Synthesia, who narrate the country’s alleged well-being in a digital news program called *House of News*. There, in the form of YouTube ads and content on that platform and TikTok, the avatars accused international media of promoting a false narrative about Venezuela’s “destroyed” economy – highlighting instead maximum hotel occupancy during Carnival or the alleged profits generated by the baseball series. The videos, which garnered hundreds of thousands of

views, were also broadcast on *Venezolana de Televisión*. There, in perfect English, the avatar journalists emphasized that *Venezuela is fixed*.

But what is the purpose of this? The use of English and the use of avatars pretending to be blond or black Anglo-Saxon journalists seem to indicate that these narratives about a general economic rebound and the success of an international baseball series –rejecting at the same time journalistic reports on the massive contraction of Venezuela’s economy in recent years– seek an international projection that cleans up the government’s and the country’s image: far from the isolated autocracy, undergoing a complex humanitarian crisis, that international and independent national media have portrayed in the last decade.

The Republic of Disinformation

Sometimes, Venezuela is inserted into global networks of disinformation and digital propaganda in unexpected ways. In July 2022, an investigation by the *Digital Forensics Lab* and the media outlet *Animal Político* uncovered a disinformation and propaganda network consisting of 114 websites created by four individuals based in Venezuela. They used platforms owned by Turkish-origin companies to promote domestic narratives in Mexico, El Salvador, Spain, and Peru. Through four thousand Facebook groups, with at least 147 million subscribers, the network distributed false information.

Most of the narratives aligned with the interests of the Venezuelan government: in Mexico, the accounts promoted fake news about President Andrés Manuel López Obrador; in Bolivia, they spread false information against interim President Jeanine Áñez; in Spain, they attacked lawmakers from the *Vox* and *Partido*

Popular parties while praising *Podemos* and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*; and in Peru, they promoted the government of Pedro Castillo. However, one case stood out: in El Salvador, the accounts promoted and celebrated the government of Nayib Bukele, who is at odds with the Chavismo and has advisors from the hardline opposition party, *Voluntad Popular*. Why this dissonance?

The answer lies lost in the dubious channels of disinformation and digital propaganda that enter Venezuela and leave it: like a turbid river that expands, erodes, and saturates the cyberspace of other countries. Thus, Venezuela –among the world champions of disinformation, among the great armies of trolls in the universe– promises to become an agora of fake news, manufactured scandals, malevolent avatars of artificial intelligence, and a phantom multitude of ten thousand accounts managed from the dark and damp office of some ministry in Caracas or Moscow or Istanbul that harass, shout, and corrode: in our cyberspace, like a monstrosity that devours itself, the anachronistic extreme left and the postmodern extreme right and ideological necrophilia and the propaganda of insignificant politicians and brothel gossip and and *Ronda Magazine* the *Misión Verdad* and Sputnik news agency are destined to become one.

The United States and Venezuela: A relationship of blunders

Adriana Boersner Herrera

*“Todo está chévere en Venezuela”*¹

Bill Clinton (October 13, 1997)

Since the arrival of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1999, the relationship between the United States (USA) and Venezuela has been tense or even, as some experts have called it, schizophrenic². After so many years of tensions, beyond a schizophrenic relationship, we are now witnessing a relationship of blunders and mistakes. Chávez, a charismatic and controversial leader, presented himself as a defender of socialism and Latin American interests against US hegemony on a global level. The Chávez government's foreign policy led to a series of disagreements with the US that deepened over time.

Currently, the US's approach to dealing with Nicolás Maduro and the Venezuelan political elite has not been entirely assertive as the Venezuelan government, far from democratizing, has done the opposite. The same goes for Venezuelan policy towards

1 Chévere is a Spanish word, typical of Venezuelan slang referring to something good. In that sense, Clinton meant “All is cool in Venezuela”.

2 Carlos Romero, “Venezuela y Estados Unidos: ¿una relación esquizofrénica?” *Nueva Sociedad* 206 (2006): 78-93.

the US. Over the last twenty-five years, the Venezuelan foreign policy orientation has been anti-liberal and anti-American, trying to stop depending on the North and escape US hegemony. However, although Venezuela now certainly does not depend on the North, it does rely on other countries that have applied the same or worse conditions of dependency for Venezuela.

Antecedents

“Ayer vino el Diablo aquí, ayer estuvo el Diablo aquí, en este mismo lugar. Huele a azufre [...] el Señor Presidente de los Estados Unidos, a quien yo llamo «El Diablo», vino aquí hablando como dueño del mundo”³.

Hugo Chávez (September 20, 2006)

When Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency of Venezuela in 1999, the relationship between the US and Venezuela was relatively good and stable. Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuela was an ally of the northern country, particularly in the energy area. This relationship benefited not only political and diplomatic agreements but also commercial ones. During the first year of Hugo Chávez’s government, Chávez was received by Bill Clinton at the White House. In the Clinton-Chávez meeting, the commercial relationship was at the center of the discussion.

As Bill Clinton noted in 1999, Venezuela was very important to the United States as their main external source of energy⁴. Bill

3 Own translation: “The Devil came here yesterday; the Devil was here, in this very place. I smell sulfur [...] The President of the United States, whom I call The Devil, came here speaking as the owner of the world”.

4 U.S. Department of State Archive. 2001. “Press Briefing by Jim Dobbins, NSC Senior Director for Inter-American Affairs”. https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/wha/990111_briefing.html

Clinton knew Venezuela and was already aware of the progress that had been achieved, but, above all, of the energy relevance that Venezuela represented for the US. Before this meeting with Chávez, in October 1997, Bill Clinton visited Caracas and praised Rafael Caldera's government for moving the country toward the world center of energy, democracy, and prosperity⁵. Clinton would affirm on this trip that everything was *chévere* in Caracas that everything was *chévere* in Venezuela. This was the last time that a US president visited Venezuelan territory⁶.

As the Chávez government progressed, the relationship deteriorated. Chávez began publicly criticizing US foreign policy and reaching out to other leaders in and outside the region who shared his views and worldview. This was particularly emphasized after the April 2002 coup. The bilateral relationship became increasingly tense, and Chávez began to have a more critical discourse against the US government. In response, Washington turned harsher towards the government in Caracas, openly accusing them of supporting terrorism and violating human rights. In 2006, the US Secretary of State accused the Venezuelan government of not cooperating with antiterrorist efforts.

That same year, 2006, Chávez defined US President George W. Bush as '*El Diablo*' in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly, and he spoke about the threat US imperialism posed

5 Bill Clinton, "Remarks to the Citizens of Venezuela in Caracas". <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1997-book2/pdf/PPP-1997-book2-doc-pg1345.pdf>

6 US Presidents who visited Venezuela: John F. Kennedy (January 1961), Jimmy Carter (March 1978), George H. W. Bush (December 1990), and Bill Clinton (October 1997). Richard Nixon visited Venezuela in 1958 when he was vice president.

to the world⁷. In 2007, the Venezuelan government nationalized several US companies, including the operations of the oil company ExxonMobil in the country. In 2008, the diplomatic relationship reached one of its most climactic points when Chávez expelled the US ambassador to Venezuela, Patrick Duddy⁸, and ordered the return of Bernardo Álvarez, the Venezuelan ambassador in Washington. Similarly, the US sanctioned two Venezuelan individuals for their connection to radical groups and other individuals and companies for their links to drug trafficking. In 2010, the Obama administration accused the Venezuelan government (and fourteen other Latin American governments) of not cooperating in the fight against drug trafficking.

In 2013, Hugo Chávez died and was succeeded by his then-vice president, Nicolás Maduro, who continued, for some time, his predecessor's foreign policy. That is, the hostile rhetoric was maintained. However, the US decided to implement more sanctions against the Venezuelan government. In December 2014, the Barack Obama administration accused the Maduro regime of human rights violations, corruption, and drug trafficking⁹.

7 Hugo Chávez, "Intervención del Presidente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, en la LXI Asamblea General de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas." (2006, September 20). <https://repositorio.uasb.edu.ec/bitstream/10644/2055/1/CI-07-AR.pdf>

8 This action followed a dispute between the US and Bolivia. Chávez expressed his support for Bolivian President Evo Morales. Patrick Duddy returned to Venezuela as US Ambassador in mid-2009 under the Barack Obama Administration and ended his diplomatic mission a year later. Obama nominated Larry Palmer as his replacement, but Hugo Chávez refused to accept him as ambassador. See R.F.I. "Chavez rejects Palmer as US Ambassador". (2010, December 19). <https://www.rfi.fr/es/americas/20101219-chavez-rechaza-palmer-como-embajador-de-eeuu>

9 In 2023, Venezuela remains designated on the list of countries that have not collaborated in international efforts against drug trafficking. See: Insight Crime. "Venezuela's Cocaine Revolution". (2022, April). <https://insightcrime>.

It issued a new executive order declaring that the situation in Venezuela threatened US's national security and foreign policy¹⁰. From then on, stronger sanctions against the Venezuelan government were applied.

In 2019, the tension between the US and Venezuela reached another high point following several events, including the crisis with the interim presidency¹¹ when the American government recognized Juan Guaidó, and Venezuela's entry into humanitarian aid arranged by several countries. The US and other Latin American and European countries recognized Guaidó as the legitimate president, while the Nicolás Maduro regime and its allies, such as China, Cuba, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, considered it a coup attempt. Other events that will make the bilateral relationship even more complicated included the closure of the US embassy in Caracas¹² and the Venezuelan embassy in Washington; the so-called *Operación Libertad*, in which the opposition leader Leopoldo López was released from house arrest and the head of the Intelligence Service abandoned his position; and the so-called *Operación Gedeón* in which, according to the Maduro government, the Venezuelan armed forces neutralized an armed incursion into the country, Americans among them; finally, the arrest of Alex

org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Venezuelas-Cocaine-Revolution-InSight-Crime-Apr-2022.pdf; U.S. Department of State. "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report." (2023, March). <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/INCSR-2023-Vol-1.pdf>

- 10 *Public Law* No: 113-278. "Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014." <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-bill/2142>
- 11 Boersner, Adriana. "Venezuela 2019: A Tale of Two Presidents". *Revista de Ciencia Política* 40, no. 2 (2020): 539-565.
- 12 In August 2019, the US Department of State opened the Venezuelan Affairs Unit at the US Embassy in Bogotá. Since then, the United States Mission in Venezuela has been located there.

Saab –an ally of the Maduro government– in 2020 in Cape Verde and his subsequent extradition to the US in 2021.

Currently, although Joe Biden’s administration still does not recognize Nicolás Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela¹³, the US has had to negotiate with his government on various points of interest. For instance, since the start of Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, on at least two occasions, official US government envoys have visited Caracas to discuss the release of Americans imprisoned in Venezuela, the reactivation of negotiations between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan opposition, and the possibility of reactivating the activities of American companies in the oil sector.

At the time of writing this article, diplomatic relations have not yet been reactivated, most of the economic sanctions against Venezuela remain, the US keeps Venezuela on the list of high-risk countries for travel¹⁴, and bilateral ties as well as knowledge on bilateral relations are maintained more through interest groups and non-profit organizations than at the intergovernmental level.

13 In January 2023, the United States stopped recognizing Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela. At the beginning of 2023, Nicolás Maduro expressed interest in reactivating talks with the United States and working on normalizing relations. See, U.S. Department of State. “Venezuela’s Interim Government and the 2015 National Assembly.” (2023, January 3). <https://www.state.gov/venezuelas-interim-government-and-the-2015-national-assembly/>; France24. “Venezuela Leader Says Willing to Work at Normalizing US Ties.” (2023, January 02). <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230102-venezuela-leader-says-willing-to-work-at-normalizing-us-ties>

14 Travel State Gov. “Venezuela Travel Advisory.” (2023, January 12). <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/venezuela-travel-advisory.html>

The consequences of this misshaped relationship

The relationship between the US and Venezuela has been inconvenient for both countries, more than either government is willing to admit. Although Venezuela has been more commercially and politically dependent on the US than vice versa, the tense relationship has not been wholly beneficial to Washington. The mistakes have been numerous and in various areas.

Commerce. The commercial relationship between the US and Venezuela has historically been focused on the purchase and sale of oil. Venezuela used to be one of the world's largest oil producers, and the US was one of its largest buyers and consumers. When Chávez set out to expropriate the US oil companies in Venezuelan territory, this not only impacted oil production but, naturally, the political and commercial relationship. The US saw this as a threat to its economic and geopolitical interests, which led to a cooling in the bilateral relationship. The most obvious consequence is that Venezuela isn't selling oil to a market that for many years was safe and promptly paid, and the US is not receiving oil from a geographically close supplier at a time when it has stopped receiving oil for the sanctions imposed on Russia due to the War in Ukraine.

Economic sanctions. In response to Chávez's position on US efforts to combat terrorism and the drug trade, George W. Bush imposed the first economic sanctions on Venezuela in 2006. On this occasion, the US prohibited any arms trade or transfer to Venezuela¹⁵. In 2008, the US Treasury Department sanctioned two

15 From that moment on, Venezuela has acquired military technology and weapons from other markets, mainly from Russia. Still, other countries continued to sell arms to Venezuela for a few years. Such was the case of China, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

individuals and two agencies for their involvement in supporting Hezbollah, the Lebanese radical group. When Barack Obama declared Venezuela an “unusual and extraordinary threat” to the national security of the United States, more sanctions were imposed, including a ban on the sale of military technology, suspension of entry into US territory for certain members of the Venezuelan government, freezing assets, imposing trade restrictions with Venezuela, and sanctions against individuals from the Venezuelan government involved in the violation of human rights.

With the arrival of President Donald Trump to power in 2017, the economic sanctions against Venezuela intensified. Trump imposed more sanctions on the Venezuelan oil industry and expanded the list of those sanctioned (by now, over 300 individuals and companies)¹⁶. All these sanctions also affected US companies that did business with Venezuela. Although the sanctions have been a problem for the Maduro government, he has managed to expand his internal and international networks to ensure they do not jeopardize his survival in power. Alliances with other authoritarian governments, selling oil to historically non-traditional markets like India, diversifying its business allies, exploiting illegal mining¹⁷ and drug smuggling economies, money laundering, and other strategies have become vital for the Venezuelan political elite to continue to capitalize¹⁸. Addressing

16 Congressional Research Service. “Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions”. (November 2022). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10715>

17 *Insight Crime*. “Beneath The Surface of Illegal Gold Mining In The Amazon.” (2022, November 8). <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/beneath-surface-illegal-gold-mining-amazon/>

18 Adriana Boersner, “The Menu of Strategies Used by Maduro to Mitigate The Effects of Sanctions”. *Foro Cubano* 3(23). <https://www.programacuba.com/the-menu-of-strategies-used-by-madu>

all these fronts, mainly through sanctions, has been an impossible task.

More autocratic cooperation. Although international alliances with China, Cuba, India, Iran, Turkey, and Russia have allowed the Maduro government to resolve certain areas impacted by economic sanctions and consolidate its authoritarian power, it is also true that the Venezuelan government is more dependent on these other governments. Likewise, it must fight for the Asian market, which Russia is also trying hard to enter due to sanctions. This autocratic international cooperation that Maduro has reinforced and the presence of autocracies such as China and Russia in Latin America pose a problem for the US, as referred to in the national security strategy document of October 2022¹⁹.

More polarization. The polarization in the US regarding the issue of Venezuela divides Democrats and Republicans (as well as strategic companies) as to how to manage the international relationship. Not everyone in Congress supports the sanctions against Venezuela since it is perceived as a strategy that has failed to achieve the desired changes. For example, in 2020, Democratic candidates for the presidential elections²⁰ had contrasting views on the Venezuela case, and in 2022, several Democratic legislators asked Biden to lift sanctions against Venezuela and

19 The White House. "National Security Strategy". (2022, October). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

20 Holly K. Sonneland, "EE.UU. 2020: Las Posiciones de los Candidatos Demócratas sobre Venezuela". *Americas Society/Council of The Americas*. (2020, June 2). <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/eeuu-2020-las-posiciones-de-los-candidatos-democratas-sobre-venezuela>

talk with Maduro²¹. Similarly, the Republican sector has used the Venezuelan case (and Venezuelans) as an electoral campaign and political strategy²². For example, recently, the former president and presidential candidate for the 2024 elections, Donald Trump, gave a speech in North Carolina in which he mentioned Venezuela²³. He exposed his one interest concerning his policy towards Venezuela: oil. Likewise, the existing polarization about Venezuela, beyond Venezuelan domestic politics, has to do with those who are for and against the US sanctions and the policies implemented by Trump and Biden concerning Venezuela.

The ones in the middle. Venezuelans are the ones that have been most impacted by the sanctions and the breakdown of bilateral relations. According to recent data, there are more than 7.3 million Venezuelan refugees and/or migrants worldwide, mostly in the Latin American region²⁴. Although there are various estimates, approximately over 600,000 Venezuelans are in the US. This migration has forced the US government to rethink its immigration system and create various initiatives to ensure that Venezuelan migrants who are already in the US can remain legally and that those who aren't can legally enter the country.

21 Letter to President Joe Biden, led by representatives Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Jesús García (D-Ill) (May 2022). <https://grijalva.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Venezuela-Letter-Grijalva-Garcia.pdf>

22 Max Greenwood, "GOP Turns Venezuela into Florida Attack Line". *The Hill*. (2019). <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/433777-gop-turns-venezuela-into-florida-attack-line/>; Nick Mordowanec, "GOP Accused of Using Venezuelans as Pawns Despite Vocal Support", *Newsweek* (2022). <https://www.newsweek.com/gop-accused-using-venezuelans-pawns-despite-vocal-support-1743436>

23 Donald Trump, "Donald Trump delivers a speech in North Carolina". *Sky News*. (2023). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAOsUf44iSI>

24 R4V. "Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela." (2023). <https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes>

However, many Venezuelans continue on their way to escape their country, even at the risk of death along the road²⁵. At the same time, the sanctions and the breakdown of bilateral relations have impacted the Venezuelan population in other areas, such as importing essential food, mobilizing funds, donations to non-governmental organizations, traveling to and from Venezuela, having access to consular services, considerably negative effects on the country's economy²⁶ and on the social conditions²⁷ of the Venezuelan population.

Why does all this matter?

Understanding that this relationship is in a status of failure is important for several reasons. The first one is that the approach and the menu of strategies that the US has implemented to encourage political changes and greater democracy in Venezuela have not generated the desired effects. The sanctions were designed to financially constrain Nicolás Maduro's government and force it to change its authoritarian policies. That clearly has not been achieved. It is important then to rethink whether economic sanctions, for example, are still relevant in their current format as a strategy to deal with relations with Venezuela.

25 Julie Turkewitz, "Necesito un Futuro Para Mis Hijos", *The New York Times*. (2022, October 7). <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2022/10/07/espanol/darien-venezolanos.html>

26 Manuel Sutherland, "El Impacto y La Naturaleza Real de Las Sanciones Económicas Impuestas Sobre Venezuela". *Provea*. (2019). <https://provea.org/publicaciones/investigaciones/investigacion-especial-impacto-y-naturaleza-real-de-las-sanciones-economicas-impuestas-a-venezuela/>

27 Maryhen Jimenez, "The Weakening of Civil Society in Venezuela-An Unintended Consequence of Economic Sanctions?" *Foro Cubano* 3(23) (2020). <https://www.programacuba.com/the-weakening-civil-society-in-vene>

Secondly, this bilateral relationship cannot be seen separate from the regional context. It should not be forgotten that the Latin American political tableau has changed in 2022-2023, with which Maduro could resume regional support (e.g., Brazil, Colombia, Honduras) and emerge from isolation from countries that had previously criticized Maduro or imposed sanctions (e.g., Bolsonaro in Brazil or Duque in Colombia). Depending on negotiations in Latin America and the political support that Maduro can obtain in the region, the US-Venezuela relationship could improve or worsen in the coming months and years.

Thirdly, the US and Venezuela share important and complementary trade ties. Given the undergoing War in Ukraine, both countries have been impacted (of course, not to the same extent) by the breakdown of the bilateral relationship. On the one hand, the US decided to sanction Russian oil and start looking for alternative sources to buy oil. While it is true that some countries in Latin America have increased their oil production, and others have offered to supply some of the oil that the US does not buy from Russia, Washington has been unable to find a solid supplier in Latin America to meet their needs. On the other hand, Venezuela is not immune to sanctions against Russia. Venezuela must now compete with Russia in the international oil market because both countries are selling to the same consumers. Likewise, Venezuela has been indirectly sanctioned by not being able to access the accounts and money it has in Russian banks.

Finally, as long as there is polarization on the issue of Venezuela or the US sanctions, this will continue to be used as a political campaign and a basis for action, which, in the short and long term, will not help the bilateral relationship. As long as politicians and interest groups in both countries continue to see the relationship as a zero-sum game, the responses and policies

will continue to be misguided and aimed only at benefiting particular interests.

Gustavo Petro's first year and the challenges for freedom in Colombia

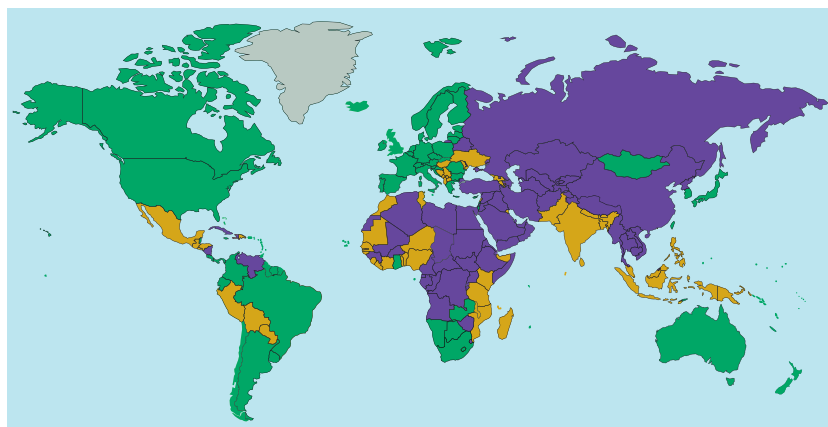
A strong State against society and weak against illegality?

Cristian Rojas González

In 2022, Colombia was the country that rose the most in the Freedom House report, a Washington-based NGO that estimates freedoms in the world and classifies nations as “Free”, “Partly free”, or “Not free”.

In Latin America, Uruguay has the highest score with 96/100, while Cuba ranks last with 12/100. Amid this enormous difference in the exercise of freedoms, several countries in the region are classified as “partly free”, as is the case of Mexico or Peru. Colombia was found in that range until last year's measurement when it increased by 6 points, entering the “Free country” category¹.

1 *Freedom House*. Freedom in the world map. <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023>



■ Free ■ Partly Free ■ No Free

Fuente: <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023>

However, the most relevant event in Colombia in 2022 was not related to said freedom increase; on the contrary, it was an event that could make the country's passage through the group of free nations ephemeral: Gustavo Petro's election for the Presidency of the Republic.

There are two dimensions in which the Petro government can seriously affect the exercise of freedoms: the statist policies of his administration and the deterioration of security. Another look at Freedom House's map can help us understand this. It clearly –and without surprises– shows that the State is the entity with the greatest capacity to repress freedom; thus, “not free” countries are precisely those under authoritarian regimes of different types. “Partly free” countries, on the other hand, may have governments that slide towards authoritarianism or weak states in which illegal groups are the main repressors.

Colombia is under both threats in the first year of the Gustavo Petro administration. On the one hand, the socialist inspiration of

the current government points towards a greater presence of the State in social and economic life –without ruling out authoritarian veins that could still be developed–. On the other hand, a more powerful State in different spheres does not equate to a stronger rule of law and stance against crime.

In this text, I will address the two aforementioned dimensions to answer whether Colombia can maintain its status as a free country under the current government. In the first place, I will analyze Petro's first year in the House of Nariño from the point of view of strengthening the executive power vis-a-vis other public powers, the market, and civil society. Secondly, I will focus on the security situation and the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism.

1. The State against the Ghost of “Neoliberalism”

From the perspective of the Colombian left, the country has not managed to consolidate the Social State of Law (ESD for its Spanish acronym) that was promised in the Political Constitution of 1991 because –they say– the “neoliberal” model has privileged big capital to the detriment of social rights. Without ignoring pending challenges, this can be met with the country's enormous progress. For instance, gross national coverage at the secondary level of education went from 52% in 2001 to 86% in 2020²; infant mortality was halved in 20 years (from 22 to 11 babies per 1,000

2 *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística-DANE*. 2022. “Análisis de accesibilidad a centros educativos”. https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/notas-estadisticas/abr_2022_nota_estadistica_analisis_accesibilidad_centros_educativos.pdf

live births between 1999 and 2021)³; health insurance coverage reached 99.6%⁴, etc.

This has been achieved thanks to an understanding of the ESD that combines State action and private for and non-profit initiatives, which has allowed the educational and health sector or pension system, among others, to advance in coverage and quality. However, an ideological vision shared by President Petro and his political side demands a greater State presence to the detriment of the participation of private organizations.

This demand dates back to the times of the National Constituent Assembly when, together with the announcement of Colombia as an ESD, César Gaviria's government promoted a process of economic opening to the world. For some non-conformists who longed for a collectivist system, this meant implementing the "neoliberal" model of the "Washington Consensus", while the new Constitution remained supposedly on paper⁵.

The return of those radical non-conformists has come with Petro. The desire to expel or reduce the private actors they accuse

3 *World Bank*. Tasa de mortalidad, bebés (por cada 1.000 nacidos vivos) - Colombia. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN?locations=CO>

4 *Ministerio de Salud*. Boletín de Prensa Número 373 de 2022 (26/06/2022). <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/Colombia-llego-al-aseguramiento-universal-en-salud-al-alcanzar-el-99.6.aspx>

5 Private participation –and with it, an improvement in the guarantee of social rights– grew in 2012 with the dissolution of the Social Security Institute (ISS), a State entity in charge of managing health and pension resources, which turned into a great machine of corruption and inefficiency. Its disappearance did not mean the State ceased to participate directly in social security, but it did so in parallel with the private sector that promoted new health promoting entities (EPS), health provider institutions (IPS) and pension funds.

of turning health, pensions, education, etc., into a business is clearly observed in the three main reforms presented by the Government to date: health, pension, and labor reform. The first two seek a nationalization that ignores the important advances I have already mentioned, while the third claims to improve workers' conditions but puts businessmen, especially small and medium-sized ones, up against the ropes.

The most controversial one has been the health reform, which has received strong criticism and counter proposals from associations and think tanks such as ANDI (National Association of Entrepreneurs)⁶, ANIF-Centro de Estudios Económicos⁷, and Fedesarrollo⁸, whose documents can be consulted to understand the reform, its drawbacks, and potential impacts. For its part, the pension reform threatens to indirectly eliminate private funds if it forces a very high percentage of workers with lower incomes to join the state company Colpensiones. And the labor reform has been criticized for its potential to destroy 450,000 jobs, according to researchers at the Central Bank⁹. Regarding the latter, it should

6 ANDI. "Propuesta de Pacto Nacional por un mejor Sistema de Salud en Colombia". May 15th, 2023. <https://www.andi.com.co/Home/Noticia/17446-propuesta-de-pacto-nacional-por-un-mejo>

7 ANIF-Centro de Estudios Económicos. "Posibles impactos del marchitamiento de las EPS en el marco de la reforma a la salud". June 16th, 2023. <https://www.anif.com.co/informe-semanal/posibles-impactos-del-marchitamiento-de-las-eps-en-el-marco-de-la-reforma-a-la-salud/>

8 Fedesarrollo. "Logros en equidad del sistema de salud y la reforma en Colombia". June 2023. Project director: Jairo Núñez. <https://www.repository.fedesarrollo.org.co/handle/11445/4434>

9 Banco de la República. Grupo de Análisis del Mercado Laboral (GAMLA). "Estabilidad en el mercado laboral y análisis cuantitativo de algunos impactos del proyecto de ley de reforma laboral". RML Reportes del Mercado Laboral. April 2023. <https://repositorio.banrep.gov.co/bitstream/handle/20.500.12134/10626/reporte-de-mercado-laboral-abril-2023.pdf>

be noted that even the Labor Minister, Gloria Inés Ramírez (a member of the Communist Party), has said she is not seeking to create employment¹⁰.

The reform package not only jeopardizes social achievements but also directly attacks the freedoms of users, companies, and institutions. However, this first year of a new Government and Congress has greatly challenged Gustavo Petro's legislative agenda. The health reform has had a difficult process for its approval, and during the turbulence, its author, the radical activist Carolina Corcho, was removed from the minister position. The pension reform has also barely taken its first steps, and the labor reform was shelved in June, although it will be presented again by the Government.

Can Petro approve his ambitious reforms? Currently, there is not enough of a pro-government bench to guarantee it¹¹. To achieve majorities, Petro must convince by different means –not usually those of argumentation– the independent parties that were part of his coalition until he himself announced the break

10 *Forbes Magazin*. "El objetivo de la reforma no es generar empleo, sino mejorar condiciones laborales: Mintrabajo". April 10th, 2023. <https://forbes.co/2023/04/10/economia-y-finanzas/el-objetivo-de-la-reforma-laboral-no-es-generar-empleo-mintrabajo>

11 Today the government bench has 39 out of a total of 108 senators, 20 of which belong to the incumbent party, *Pacto Histórico*. Some critics from the *Partido Verde* should be subtracted. The opposition includes 24 senators from *Centro Democrático* (former President Álvaro Uribe's party) and *Cambio Radical*; the independents total 30 between *Partido Conservador*, *Partido de la U*, and Christian movements; and, finally, there is the indecisive *Partido Liberal* that has had a bittersweet relationship with the Government.

on Twitter. The ideological distance and tensions of the first year will make these negotiations difficult¹².

In this scenario, it is foreseeable that the reforms will not be approved as they had been initially designed. In response, Petro has appealed to the people to take the streets as if it were 2021, when he agitated the opposition masses. However, his calls to pressure Congress have not had the expected turnout or have been surpassed by the marches against him. In the midst of poor management and scandals of great resonance in public opinion, his favorability is increasingly low in the polls¹³, and the media have remained critical and independent. This, moreover, may be the preamble to a defeat in the local elections next October, where the approval or rejection of his proposal will be seen.

In conclusion, freedoms in Colombia are threatened by Gustavo Petro's political project, but if his claims fail to materialize due to other institutions' independence¹⁴, added to a strong and critical press and civil society, the evaluation of Colombia in a

12 *Partido Liberal* is key, yet even being registered in the Socialist International, its current leader is César Gaviria, whom I have already mentioned in this text regarding his government of economic opening (1990-1994) –for which the left identifies him as a “neoliberal” enemy–, and who has sought to defend the transformations and achievements of his administration, which would be erased with these reforms.

13 E.g. you may review the Invamer survey of June 2023 in this analysis from *La Silla Vacía*. <https://www.lasillavacia.com/historias/silla-nacional/invamer-poll-petro-sigue-cayendo-pero-el-golpe-por-escandalos-es-leve/>

14 Until now, the High Courts have shown themselves to be independent, as have the Prosecutor's Office and the Attorney General's Office. Petro was able to influence the election of the Comptroller General, but the Council of State declared the result void due to defects in the procedure in Congress. The independence of the Constitutional Court, which must review the reforms (if approved) and other government initiatives to assess their constitutionality, will be especially important. Petro's ability to influence the configuration

measure like Freedom House may be less negative than expected before seeing this first year of scandals and failure. Thus, the real challenge for freedom in Colombia may lie in the second dimension I mentioned, one where the Petro government is having a huge impact: insecurity and the strengthening of groups outside the law.

2. The “re-Colombianization” of Colombia

In 2010, Mauricio Cárdenas and Kevin Casas-Zamora wrote an article for the influential American think tank Brookings¹⁵, in which they spoke of the “Colombianization” of Mexico, warning that this term is pejorative, and that is why then-President Obama asked his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to avoid the analogy with Colombia when talking about the violence of drug trafficking and illegal groups. But the analogy, while derogatory and imprecise, is not arbitrary; it refers to Colombia in the 1990s, subjected to drug cartels, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and other criminal structures. An almost failed state.

Without having overcome all its security problems, the country’s success in the 2000s and onwards is widely known through indicators as important as the homicide rate that went from 85 to 24 per 100,000 inhabitants, between 1991 and 2020¹⁶. But

of these institutions in the coming years will depend on his influence in Congress.

15 *Brookings*. Mauricio Cárdenas and Kevin Casa Zamora. “La ‘colombianización’ de México y sus consecuencias”. September 21st, 2010. <https://www.brookings.edu/es/articles/la-colombianizacion-de-mexico-y-sus-consecuencias/>

16 *World Bank*. “Homicidios intencionales (por cada 100.000 habitantes) - Colombia” <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=CO>

the setback in the first year of Petro's government is evident, and its implications in terms of freedom will be equally blunt.

According to reports from the Ministry of Defense, in the first four months of 2023, kidnappings increased by 162%¹⁷ compared to the same period of the previous year; The UN Verification Mission (created to monitor the implementation of the agreement between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC) indicates that between January and May, 19,976 forced displaced individuals were registered in 14 of the 32 departments of the country¹⁸; and, according to the NGO Indepaz, as of May 31, 40 massacres have been committed so far this year and 69 social leaders have been assassinated. This data anticipates a dramatic increase compared to 2022¹⁹.

Colombia could be experiencing a “re-Colombianization”, in the sense of returning to its brutal reality of 30 years ago. And the ingredients are the same, starting with drug trafficking. The increase in hectares of coca cultivated began to gain strength in 2014 amid negotiations with the FARC in Havana (Cuba), when measures such as the use of glyphosate were reconsidered. However, the problem is currently worsening because, according to information from the Ministry of Defense itself, in the first three

17 *Asuntos Legales*. “Las víctimas de secuestros aumentaron 212% entre enero y abril de 2023, hasta 131”. June 8th, 2023. <https://www.asuntoslegales.com.co/consumidor/las-victimas-de-secuestros-aumentaron-212-entre-enero-y-abril-de-2023-hasta-131-3632560>

18 *Revista Semana*. “Misión de Verificación de ONU alerta por violencia en Colombia: ‘Se está socavando la construcción de la paz en algunos territorios’”. July 6th, 2023. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/mision-de-verificacion-de-onu-alerta-por-violencia-en-el-pais-se-esta-socavando-la-construccion-de-la-paz-en-algunos-territorios/202342/>

19 *Indepaz*. Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Conflictividades. <https://indepaz.org.co/observatorio-de-derechos-humanos-y-conflictividades/>

months of this year, the eradication of illicit crops fell by around 90% and the seizure of cocaine hydrochloride by almost 40%²⁰. The rise of this lucrative business strengthens illegality in the country that, according to the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime²¹, occupies second place in the ranking of countries with the largest number of criminal organizations.

These figures are part of *paz total*, the name of Gustavo Petro's peace policy, with which he has opened the door to negotiations with all groups despite their incalculable number and different nature, and without having a clear security policy to accompany it. These criticisms are shared by the prestigious sociologist and expert in the field, Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez²². I will comment on some of his reflections to better understand the foreseeable failure of *paz total*.

Pizarro²³ warns that *paz total* is a poorly-designed policy based on improvisation. First, it is based on the premise that all violence is a consequence of poverty, ignoring ideology, and

20 *El Colombiano*. "Coca incautada bajó 39 %, ¿se cae discurso de Petro?". April 9th, 2023. <https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/incautacion-de-cocaina-en-colombia-cayo-39-segun-el-ministerio-de-defensa-MG21056831>

21 *Caracol Radio*. "Colombia, segundo país con más organizaciones criminales del mundo". August 31st, 2022. https://caracol.com.co/radio/2022/08/31/internacional/1661947588_030737.html

22 Eduardo Pizarro, in addition to being a renowned academic, is also the brother of Carlos Pizarro, the murdered leader of the M-19 guerrilla group –to which Petro belonged– and signer of the peace with the government of the time, which allowed him to enter the legal political life. He is also the brother of Hernando Pizarro, who commanded a FARC dissident group in the 1990s. Thus, Eduardo Pizarro is not suspected of representing the political right. He is the uncle of María José Pizarro, one of the main representatives of *Pacto Histórico* in Congress, and a daughter of Carlos.

23 *Revista Cambio*. "El modelo de paz total del Gobierno Petro es la improvisación": Eduardo Pizarro. February 11th, 2023. <https://cambiocolombia.com/pais/>

greed. These factors have a very different nuance if we are talking about historical guerrilla groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) or the *Clan del Golfo* as a criminal gang or cartel. Pizarro says that criminal incentives must be attacked in the case of groups that are moved by greed, which implies a determined fight against drug trafficking and illegal mining. Negotiations, on the other hand, should be focused on groups with a greater ideological baggage, such as the ELN or the FARC dissidents.

The sociologist warns that the chaos of *paz total* can cause greater internal violence, and one of the reasons is that the army is immobilized before the successive ceasefire announcements with different groups that are difficult to identify. Thus, they must opt for inaction to avoid attacking any organization in rapprochement or dialogue with the Government. Added to this is the expectation of impunity generated by a weak government that, in its eagerness to show results, makes extensive concessions to illegal groups and promotes policies such as paying one million pesos a month (240 USD) to young people to “stop killing”²⁴.

The Military Forces (FFMM) and the Police are today led by Defense Minister Iván Velásquez, a lawyer who from the Supreme Court of Justice persecuted the so-called “parapolitics” (alliances between politicians and paramilitaries) and was the head of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), but who has no experience in security and defense issues, is not close to the armed forces, and his place in

el-modelo-de-paz-total-del-gobierno-petro-es-la-improvisacion-eduardo-pizarro

24 *Revista Semana*. “Polémica: Gobierno Petro pagará un millón de pesos mensuales a jóvenes para que ‘dejen de matar’”. July 10th, 2023. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/polemica-gobierno-petro-le-pagara-un-millon-de-pesos-mensuales-a-jovenes-para-que-dejen-de-matar/202308/>

the government would respond to his ideological identification with the President. Petro seems to have decided that the head of the Ministry of Defense should be a man with a profile similar to NGOs dedicated to monitoring possible human rights violations in the armed forces, and not an effective strategist in combating the criminal organizations that plague the country.

Conclusion

The relationship between the deterioration of security and freedoms is direct and already known in Colombia. Kidnapping, extortion (which has increased 24% this year²⁵), forced displacement, homicide, among others, are crimes that affect the exercise of free enterprise and freedom of the press, association, conscience, etc. For this reason, the weakness of Gustavo Petro's government in the face of crime is the greatest threat to the freedoms of Colombians in the near future. In contrast, its political weakness in carrying out the reforms is a hope for freedom.

Seen in this way, the measurement that Freedom House makes in the coming years about Colombia may be affected by the chaotic *paz total* more than by the implementation of the health, pensions, or labor reform.

25 *Noticias RCN*. "Autoridades se muestran preocupadas por el aumento de extorsiones en el país". June 6th, 2023. <https://www.noticiasrcn.com/colombia/autoridades-confirman-aumento-en-el-delito-de-extorsion-447412>

Brazil Foreign Policy: Between Tradition and Innovation

Jesús E. Mazzei Alfonzo

Abstract

The present article aims to analyze Brazilian foreign policy since the 1990s, which has oscillated between tradition and innovation, and how it articulates with the presidential coalition formed to achieve governance.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Brazil, Tradition, Innovation.

“Reminiscing is looking at the past with gratitude, living the present with passion, and building the future with a profound sense of truth and justice”.

Anonymous

Conceptual Framework. Appreciation of Foreign Policy

Brazil is one of the countries in the world with the strongest engagement in the international arena. There are a series of principles that have guided it to achieve a more coherent and solid international integration. These principles have been adapted or updated over time, especially in the 1990s, when they remained unchanged but were adjusted to a changing international order. Over time, they gained great relevance due to Brazil's re-democratization process. Both during the governments of Collor de Mello and Cardoso, as well as later during the PT governments,

a more contemporary approach was given to international affairs. In the cases of Lula and President Dilma Rousseff, a more socially oriented vision of democracy was emphasized. This vision shifted during the Bolsonaro government and is now being revisited in the new Lula administration.

Changes and shifts in foreign policy have phases and oscillations, which in turn maintain a common thread. It involves a close relationship between the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, marked by its universality. Brazil maintains diplomatic relations with 192 UN member countries, including Palestine. With over 220 units comprising embassies, diplomatic missions, and consulates, Brazil's extensive support network has been institutionalized despite the varying governing coalitions that have emerged from Fernando Henrique Cardoso to the present.

The following are the guiding principles that have historically governed Brazil's foreign policy, serving as the axes in formulation and implementation and functioning as the common thread:

Pacifism: It is based on non-confrontation, the pursuit of peacefully negotiated solutions to disputes, and the condemnation of using force to achieve external outcomes.

Universalism: It is understood as the entire array of bilateral contacts constituting Brazil's heritage, serving, among other things, to realize national interests. This universal vocation finds its roots in the fact that Brazilians have managed to establish peaceful and instrumentalized relationships with countries all over the world.

Juridicism: It is the respect for treaties and conventions, understood as sacred manifestations of International Law, undertaken by national will. Treaties and agreements are seen as legal instruments seeking agreements that are feasible to fulfill and mutually favorable.

Realism and Pragmatism: Actions tied to national interests. The idea of constructing and using the country's role as a power for international gains is abandoned; international action is depoliticized and de-ideologized.

Self-determination and non-intervention: these are nurtured by the pacifist nature of foreign policy and especially by the realism that illuminates its international execution.

Therefore, there is a tradition of diplomatic practice that is radically opposed to intervention due to the rejection that could arise from legitimizing potential interventions or corrective actions outside the system or international power environment. The principles of self-determination and non-intervention of peoples are vigorously defended.

If we look at the foreign policies during the 1990s during the governments of Collor, Itamar Franco, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso –so as not to take too much space, we will not analyze their foreign policies; nevertheless, we see in them a common thread both in the international agenda and trends, which was accentuated during the governments of Lula and Dilma Rousseff– we can observe a break in the government of Jair Bolsonaro, with a right-wing coalition that rejected some of these principles. Today, there is a context of greater hyper-globalization represented by the exponential rise of interconnections between countries, in which Brazil has sought, among other things:

First, to integrate into a highly interconnected and competitive international economy.

Secondly, to maintain the margins of maneuver to avoid rendering its historical national project unviable, based on the principles mentioned above. It seeks to build an appropriate political and economic profile in accordance with the new configuration of global power, shifting from bipolarity to multipolarity.

However, the foreign policy of this country revolves around three inquiries, the answers to which provide the guidelines for diplomatic action in recent years within the context of greater globalization represented by the exponential rise of interconnections between countries:

- Firstly, what does Brazil aim to gain from its relationship with the international arena? The evident and clearly defined objective is to secure external exchange for the advancement of development, both in its economic and social dimensions, in order to further human rights and environmental protection. These elements should serve as a foundation and can be complemented with agreements and systems that support domestic policies.
- Secondly, how does Brazil wish to engage with the international community? Here lie the principles that have traditionally guided its foreign policy, such as non-intervention, respect for self-determination, non-interference in internal affairs, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

- The third question is, what kind of world do they desire? It can be summarized in a few ideas: peace, development, and broad participation. This is why Brazil is collaborating with other countries to reform multilateral organizations, aiming to actualize the values of democracy, human rights, and environmental preservation.

In this sense, Brazil's foreign policy in recent years pursues autonomy through integration rather than isolationist autonomy, as seen during Bolsonaro's administration. With the new government under Lula, the focus is on coordinated autonomy within the international arena, which can be observed through specific examples that provide evidence of this approach.

Within the context of MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market), which serves as both an economic development factor and a source of positive political and diplomatic momentum, Brazil has engaged in the construction of a broader integration framework for South America. This is evident in agreements signed with Chile and Bolivia, as well as the closer alignment between MERCOSUR and the Andean community.

Another example is Brazil's adherence to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). This step aimed to embody one of the constitutional objectives outlined in the new 1988 Constitution and to settle an old debt and commitment. By doing so, Brazil sought to fulfill various regional and multilateral commitments, particularly with Argentina, its "rival" in the Southern Cone.

In essence, President Cardoso's commitment to principles of democracy, peace, human rights, social justice, and environmental preservation, combined with domestic policies aligned with these

objectives, enhances Brazil's credibility and its ability to influence specific international issues. This is further strengthened by the Brazilian government's decision to reassert certain diplomatic commitments in areas such as the environment, nuclear non-proliferation, and human rights, demonstrated through the signing of the NPT and recognition of the compulsory jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. These are concrete manifestations of Brazil's commitment and the type of foreign policy it pursues.

This demonstrates a consistent approach in these times, adapting to new international issues while remaining guided by its established principles and the role of the Itamaraty as the executor of Brazil's foreign policy.

All of this brings new positive assets to Brazil's international projection, which we enumerate below:

On the one hand, the trade and economic openness policy that underpins the real plan's success has led to Brazil's access to international financial markets and an increase in the country's significance as a destination or resource market for any economic activity. This has been particularly evident in the privatization processes in the telecommunications sector.

Furthermore, the leadership of a robust presidential diplomacy, guided by clear objectives, has served to enhance the country's credibility and confidently support measures taken to defend and further the reform program. This was evident during the administrations of Lula and currently with Dilma Rousseff, who placed even greater emphasis on social aspects at the domestic level.

It should be highlighted that the achievements made during the first two terms of President Lula da Silva's administration will continue to be pursued in his third term, emphasizing the defense of public liberties, increased inclusion in the political process, income distribution, and economic growth.

There are also traces of Brazil's foreign policy objectives through the years, which include the defense of democratic values, the pursuit of peace among nations, equality under the law, and, ultimately, the protection of its economic interests.

Indeed, it is worth highlighting at the bilateral level that Brazil's fundamental strategic relationship is with Argentina, which has been strengthened since the time of President Sarney, and with Mercosur, which has transcended into other areas, such as the Andean Community and is evident today in UNASUR. In the near future, Brazil aims to elevate UNASUR to a greater role in cooperation and policy coordination on this side of the world. Additionally, Patriota affirmed that they will deepen what they call the "global dialogue" with the United States and strengthen strategic ties with the European Union and China. This is within a clear stance on the importance of multilateral diplomacy as part of global governance, as well as trade negotiations, services, agricultural subsidies, and the Doha Round.

In summary, rationalizing or seeking to enhance international presence is one of the challenges President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva will face. This will require greater investments in goods and physical infrastructure, i.e., productive capital, and further strengthening the stable environment for business investment that exists today, to enhance productive capacity. This will likely determine Brazil's ability to assume a greater strategic position (global trader or global player) on the international stage, not

only within the bilateral sphere but also multilaterally (UN, OAS, UNASUR, CELAC, as well as the G-20). This is particularly important as the South American giant will host the next G-20 meeting.

On the multilateral stage, the G-20 is a forum for cooperation related to the international financial system. Brazil, one of the most active participants in forming the G-20 since the G-8 meetings, has a critical stance regarding the forum's actions. Aligned with its international tradition of defending multilateral institutions and the effective use of multilateral diplomacy, Brazilian proposals extend beyond crisis anticipation and economic revival. They also aim to promote sustainable and inclusive long-term development.

Likewise, Brazil maintains a perspective of advocating for an alliance of civilizations in its international outlook, as it rejects colonial or neocolonial policies. It believes in diplomacy through dialogue and cooperation as an option. Within the framework of multilateral policy, Brazil reiterates a historical aspiration: the reform of the UN Security Council.

In fact, Brazil's foreign policy under the Lula government faces a more globalized international context in its latest developmental phase, still marked by the uncertainties of the ongoing global economic crisis, which the South American giant has managed. This includes navigating the Russia-Ukraine conflict's evolution and the uncertainties of the banking crisis.

As a result, scholars and commentators on Brazil's foreign policy have identified historical vectors in its international relations. Indeed, historically Brazil has pursued objectives such as a clearly peaceful orientation linked to the principles of non-intervention and negotiated dispute resolution, deep respect for

the international legal framework, emphasis on the defense of democratic values, pursuit of peace among nations, legal equality, and ultimately the defense of its economic interests.

Finally, in the political realm, there is a commitment to democracy, human rights, social inclusion (an area where Brazil has made significant strides in recent years), and racial equality. This reaffirms the dedication to these values and the importance of enhancing democracy. In summary, the achievements resulting from this visit reaffirm an autonomous, independent, and pragmatic foreign policy approach, reflecting the international actions of the South American giant.

Ultimately, it aims to enhance its position in science, technology, and knowledge, and therefore, its foreign action is closely related to this triad.

In summary, Brazil has sought to deepen its integration and interrelation with the international economic-political stage, working towards a more inclusive and modernizing trend of globalization. It aims, in the end, to move towards a more integrative globalization, with a higher level of global governance and greater social mobility for the excluded to be included, within a less asymmetrical social system, ultimately creating a more democratic global governance.

On the other hand, the success of Brazil's international policy over the past three years is based on various factors. Firstly, it involves the redistribution and pursuit of a virtuous sociopolitical alliance since the 1990s, involving modern and globalist organizations and individuals from different party institutions, intellectuals, businesses, and modernizing sectors of civilian politicians and parties. These groups were once in opposition and

are now in government, such as the PT, along with the support of the PMDB and other political parties, playing a crucial role. Parties like the PSDB, which may be in government in the future, contribute to a coalition that maintains a positive structural configuration towards globalization.

Secondly, the deepening of economic internationalization and the reduction of the fiscal deficit and inflation were elements that prompted Brazil's leadership elites to address these structural issues of the Brazilian economy. This involved, for example, adapting the active role of the State as a strategic agent in temporarily supporting certain economic sectors in which Brazil holds competitive advantages in the globalized economy. As demonstrated in recent years, the State has also played a strategic role in social policies, fostering a more equitable society.

Furthermore, its globalist-progressive foreign defense policies entail an active and leadership role for Brazil in constructing global governance regimes and institutions, including the reform of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system: the transition from an international organization to a transnational one. All of this is manifested in some of Brazil's proposals within the G-20, such as the imposition of a tax on capital circulation by an international authority; successfully concluding the Doha negotiations as part of the realignment of international trade; and, finally, its role in international environmental policy, aiming to control greenhouse gas emissions and climate change impacts, as well as promoting sustainable development in the Amazon region, all of which are integral to its recently formulated public policies.

Finally, it is worth noting that Brazil is increasingly seeking to expand its international trade in goods and services, with flagship companies like Embraer, Vale, Odebrecht, Petrobras,

among others, having established their products and services internationally, especially in its most important allies, such as China, the United States, and the European Union. Brazil's aim is not to remain merely an exporter of commodities like soybeans, iron, cellulose, and oil. Therefore, Brazil is projected to continue its transition towards a more globalized information society, maintaining the pace of progress from an agriculturally based industrial society with high asymmetries akin to the 19th century, to a more inclusive and multilateral one. This transition reflects a foreign policy anchored in robust traditional principles, yet adapted to the contemporary era of foreign relations and international affairs.

What is the impact of structural changes on the country's international integration, on the conceptual basis of foreign policy? As previously mentioned, foreign policy responded to these changes by becoming more proactive and pragmatic. Its conceptual basis has expanded, combining themes and agendas from the period before the change with new ones. From the past, foreign policy retained the defense of universal multilateralism and external autonomy, reinterpreted in the current administration by the ambition to implement an independent international program in international politics, independent of the preferences of the powers.

Among the "new" concepts, which are actually a reconfiguration of previous concepts, the identity of a mediator can be mentioned. The defense of universal multilateralism reflects the classic Brazilian international identity of exercising a mediating role in multilateral diplomacy. During the Cold War period, this mediation was primarily conducted between the North and the South, or between developed and underdeveloped countries.

Another concept, which is also a result of the reconfiguration of previous concepts, is the defense of multipolarity, currently identified with the democratization of decision-making processes in global forums, as well as the emergence of new powers that create opportunities for international alignment for countries like Brazil. The idea of Brazil as an example/model is also reiterated today based on certain national attributes, such as the absence of conflicts of ethnic, religious, or cultural nature, the emphasis on the peaceful dimension of Brazil's international emergence, and the renunciation of geopolitical objectives that may require the use of military capabilities on the international stage, as well as its conciliatory nature. These attributes constitute assets of Brazilian soft power, which can be employed in South-South relations, where Brazil is beginning to emerge as an important donor (Haiti, Guinea-Bissau), or as a mediator in critical international issues (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as observed, Brazil's foreign policy is proactive and forward-looking in a sober and realistic manner; it seeks to combine the ideals of building a more just and balanced international structure, while viewing it from a realistic perspective that seeks to have a sense of proportion in objectives to be achieved.

Therefore, in summary, rationalizing or seeking to increase international presence will be one of the challenges faced by President Lula, Foreign Minister Mauro Viera, and international advisor Ambassador Celso Amorín, former Foreign Minister of Brazil on two occasions. That's why I have outlined some features of where they should aim to go in the coming years. They have, in

this regard, a rich historical legacy to draw upon to achieve this in the near future.

Finally, I anticipate that there will be a greater Brazilian presidential diplomacy, but with a sense of proportion, as has been the trend over the last 25 years. This refers to the personal handling of foreign policy matters by the president, where the personalized power of the leader is expressed in an articulate manner. President Lula will continue to use this approach in a sober and realistic way in the first three months. The government coalition does not hinder the implementation of foreign policy in the coming months.

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