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Cuban Influence in Venezuela: A Model Case of Autocratic Cooperation

The relationship between Cuba and Venezuela, since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, constitutes one of the closest and most significant political ties in Latin America in recent decades. Cuba's conduct in Venezuela cannot be explained solely by personal affinities between leaders, but rather by a combination of *ideological factors and pragmatic considerations* that have guided deep cooperation in medical, political, institutional, security, propaganda, and economic spheres. This relationship has had structural effects on the Venezuelan state and has been key to the survival of the Cuban regime in the post-Cold War era. To understand this issue, it is worth asking: what are the concrete mechanisms through which Cuba projects its influence in Venezuela?

The Cuba-Venezuela nexus constitutes a perfect example of autocratic cooperation. Beyond the exchange of oil for services, a political-institutional symbiosis was consolidated: Cuba provided know-how in security and intelligence; Venezuela supplied material resources. This case illustrates how an asymmetric actor can amplify its influence by embedding itself within the state structures of an ally with greater resources, thereby shaping the democratic trajectory of an entire subregion

Shared Ideologies, Converging Interests

From an ideological perspective, the alliance between Cuba and Venezuela is grounded in a shared vision of socialism, anti-imperialism, and rejection of the Western liberal-democratic model. For Cuba, Hugo Chávez's arrival represented a strategic opportunity to revitalize the revolutionary project and break out of the international isolation that followed the Soviet collapse. Chavismo adopted central elements of Cuban political discourse, such as the exaltation of national sovereignty, the construction of an external enemy –primarily the United States– and the legitimization of political power concentrated in the Executive. This ideological convergence facilitated acceptance of Cuban influence in sensitive areas of the Venezuelan state and enabled the international projection of the Cuban political model in Latin America.

Beyond ideological affinity, Cuba's conduct in Venezuela has been deeply shaped by pragmatic interests. After the economic crisis of the "Special Period," Cuba faced a severe shortage of energy and financial resources. Venezuela, as an oil-producing country, became a strategically fundamental partner for the Cuban regime's economic survival. Bilateral agreements allowed Cuba to receive oil on preferential terms in exchange for professional services and technical advice. This exchange was highly beneficial for Cuba and allowed it to sustain its economic and political model for more than a decade. At the same time, Venezuela obtained support in areas where the state lacked solid institutional capacity.

One of the most visible examples of Cuban influence is medical cooperation, particularly through *Mission Barrio Adentro*. Through this program, thousands of Cuban doctors and other health professionals were assigned to provide primary health care across Venezuela, significantly expanding access to medical services in

historically underserved communities. However, various studies indicate that this cooperation also served political functions. Cuban professionals operated under strict hierarchical control and, in many cases, took part in community activities linked to political mobilization and social surveillance. In this way, medical cooperation combined humanitarian objectives with strategies of control and political legitimization.

The development of Venezuelan political cadres under the Cuban model has been another central component of the bilateral relationship. Militants of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and public officials received training in Cuba in areas such as party organization, ideological training, political communication, and power management. Likewise, the Cuban experience influenced the institutional transformation of the Venezuelan state, promoting greater centralization of power, the subordination of public branches of government to the Executive, and the weakening of accountability mechanisms. These reforms reflect the transfer of a state model oriented toward remaining in power.

Regarding security and intelligence, Cuba has provided technical and strategic advice to Venezuelan intelligence services. The reorganization of these agencies was aimed at identifying and neutralizing political dissent, following patterns developed in Cuba over decades. Cuban influence is also visible in the systematic use of political propaganda, characterized by control of state media, the construction of polarizing narratives, and the delegitimization of the opposition as an internal threat or foreign instrument. These practices have been central to the consolidation of Chavista power.

Comparing the international behavior of the Cuban regime with that of contemporary authoritarian powers such as Russia,

China, or, to a lesser extent, Iran may seem, at first glance, like a disproportionate exercise. However, from a strategic perspective, what is relevant is not the magnitude of material power, but rather the *coherence between ends, means, and context*. Cuba shares three fundamental traits with these regimes:

- a) *An instrumental conception of democracy*, understood not as a set of universal rules, but as a label adaptable to political convenience;
- b) *The use of indirect influence*, prioritizing cultural, informational, and organizational penetration over direct coercion; and
- c) *The exploitation of the internal vulnerabilities of democracies*, particularly polarization, inequality, and the discrediting of political elites.

The central difference lies in scale. While Russia and China deploy significant financial, technological, and military resources, Cuba operates as a *low-cost normative entrepreneur*, specializing in political advisory work, cadre training, and discursive coordination. Its comparative advantage lies precisely in its material modesty: its influence is less visible, less confrontational, and therefore more difficult to counter. In cases such as Venezuela, Cuba's role has demonstrated the distinctive capabilities of its asymmetric influence.

Venezuela is an example and setting of a *functional complementarity among autocracies* –which reduces the costs of authoritarian governance for the Venezuelan regime– where Cuba acts as the key provider of know-how and personnel for internal control, exerting the deepest influence on surveillance, repression, intelligence, propaganda, and cadre training, serving as a model of authoritarian survival. Iran acts as a tactical and opportunistic partner, with emphasis on cooperation to circumvent sanctions and the transfer of certain military technologies (e.g.,

drones). Russia functions as a guarantor of strategic deterrence and military backing, with influence in security, defense, and geopolitical support, but with less penetration into the day-to-day administration of the state. China concentrates on the economic, technological, and institutional-technical dimension, promoting a pragmatic authoritarianism based on investments, credit, and control of cyberspace technologies.

Cuba's role in Venezuela is explained, in summary, by the convergence of ideological and pragmatic factors. Cuba found in Venezuela a key ally for projecting its political model and securing its economic survival, while Chavismo benefited from Cuban experience in state control, political mobilization, and resistance to international isolation. Medical cooperation, cadre training, institutional advisory support, security, propaganda, and economic ties reveal a deep relationship that has shaped the Venezuelan political system and has had lasting consequences for democracy and governance in the region.

Conclusion

From a long-term perspective, the Cuban strategy has been notably effective in some areas but limited in others. It has succeeded in influencing discourses and agendas within regional institutions such as CLACSO, protecting authoritarian allies such as Chavismo, and surviving adverse systemic changes such as the end of the USSR. However, it also faces structural limits: ideological erosion, loss of economic attractiveness, and growing international scrutiny. As I have repeatedly warned, the persistence of this influence depends both on Cuban action and on the internal weaknesses of Latin American democracies.

Within the global authoritarian ecosystem, Cuba performs a specific function: it acts as a *facilitator* and *legitimizer* of illiberal and

anti-liberal projects in Latin America. It does not impose models, but rather offers a set of governance practices, narratives, and techniques that other actors adapt to their national realities. This makes Cuba a particularly influential actor in contexts of failed democratic transition or crises of political representation. Where institutions are fragile and democracy is perceived as incapable of responding to social demands, the Cuban experience appears –paradoxically– as an example of stability and resilience.