

# Autocracy promotion in Latin America: the cases of Cuba and Venezuela

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*La promozione dell'autocrazia in America Latina:  
i casi di Cuba e Venezuela*

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## Abstract

The following article will examine the phenomenon of autocracy promotion in Latin America, focusing on Cuba and Venezuela, two countries that have played an active role in the region with the aim of increasing their influence, trying to export the political ideology and extreme left economic institutions that still characterises them. The main historical events of the two countries will be pointed out, which is essential to understand the nature of the close relationship between them. Furthermore, the article will highlight the main consequences of this alliance, both at regional and international level, it will show how the cooperation between Cuba and Venezuela has reached all fields, economic, political, social and military and it will examine the main tools used to achieve common goals and interests. There are many important issues to take into account when we talk about autocracy promotion: this paper focuses on the cases in which this phenomenon was successful, highlighting how the Venezuelan and Cuban influence has transformed many countries. Finally, an analysis of the current Latin American scenario will be carried out.

## Keywords

**Autocracy promotion, Latin America, Authoritarian regimes, Cuba, Venezuela.**

## Riassunto

Nel seguente articolo verrà preso in esame il fenomeno dell'autocracy promotion in America Latina, focalizzando l'attenzione su Cuba e Venezuela, due paesi che in passato hanno svolto un ruolo attivo nella regione con lo scopo di aumentare la propria influenza cercando di esportare l'ideologia politica e le istituzioni economiche di estrema sinistra che ancora li caratterizza. Verranno analizzati gli eventi principali del passato di ciascuno dei due paesi, elemento fondamentale per comprendere la natura della stretta relazione che li unisce, inoltre verranno messe in luce le principali conseguenze di questa alleanza sia a livello regionale che internazionale. Si vedrà come la cooperazione tra Cuba e Venezuela ha raggiunto tutti gli ambiti, economico, politico, sociale e militare e verranno esaminati quali sono i principali strumenti utilizzati per il raggiungimento dei valori ed interessi comuni. Si esamineranno gli aspetti fondamentali dell'autocracy promotion dei due paesi focalizzando l'attenzione sui casi in cui ebbe successo, evidenziando i cambiamenti che provocò l'influenza venezuelana e cubana nei paesi ricettori e le conseguenze generate, visibili ancora al giorno d'oggi. Infine, verrà svolta un'analisi dello scenario latinoamericano attuale.

## Parole chiave

**Promozione delle autocrazie, America latina, Regimi autoritari, Cuba, Venezuela.**

## Introduction

In the last few decades, many studies and research have been arguing about the phenomenon of autocracy promotion, given that the number of hybrid or non-democratic regimes is constantly increasing. As *Freedom House's* research show, democracy

has suffered a decline in recent years: in 2020 there was the fifteenth consecutive drop in freedoms all over the world, confirming the recession of democracy ongoing since 2006 (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021) and, as a result, democratic institutions began to face several threats due to the resurgence of authoritarianism worldwide. The spread of democracy, implemented through the processes of contagion, control, political conditionality and incentives for democracy (Fossati, 2018a) began to deal with a “*serious rival*” (Burnell, 2010). In fact, there was a real increase and strengthening of authoritarian regimes, which are able to defend their power with the support (military, economic or diplomatic assistance) of equally authoritarian external powers. The word “autocracy promotion” refers precisely to this support: Peter Burnell defines autocracy promotion as “the deliberate attempt to influence a regime in an anti-democratic direction and the spread of authoritarian values across borders, together with the assumption of authoritarian governance models and their institutions” (Burnell, 2010, p.34). Vanderhill defines autocracy promotion as “a situation in which an actor actively supports illiberal ruling classes, groups or regimes, through direct assistance” (Vanderhill, 2013, p.23).

Over the years, in different regions of the world have emerged different autocratic centres, in which one or more authoritarian regimes attempt to expand their power and influence in neighbouring countries. As regards Latin America, the phenomenon of autocracy promotion is particularly present in two countries: Cuba and Venezuela, both authoritarian regimes that support each other and promote autocracy with the aim of increasing their influence regionally and globally, trying to export their political ideology and their economic institutions to other countries.

Cuba and Venezuela have carried out autocracy promotion towards each other but also towards other Latin American countries, sometimes successfully and sometimes without results, as will be seen in this article. In order to better understand the mechanism of autocracy promotion carried out by Cuba and Venezuela and the close relationship established over the years, it is necessary to analyse the political history of each of the two countries.

## Cuba

Over the past sixty years, Cuba was the protagonist of many events that have considerably affected international relations. In 1959 the guerrilla warfare carried out by the *26th of July Movement* overthrew the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista ensuring the triumph of the Revolution and the establishment of an authoritarian single-party communist regime. The new Cuban president Fidel Castro implemented great changes in the political and economic structure of the country, with the aim of introducing socialist economic institutions. Castro launched an agrarian reform that included the expropriation of landowners' lands in favour of peasants, eliminated the private property and nationalised foreign ownerships. For the United States the establishment of a communist regime was a great threat, given that they were in the midst of the Cold War and Cuba was only a few kilometres from US soil. Within a short time, Washington broke off diplomatic relations between the two countries and established an economic embargo against the island, seriously affecting the Cuban economy. At the same time, Cuba and the Soviet Union began to build ever-closer relations: militarily, by sending weapons and war equipment and economically, by selling sugar in exchange for oil at a reduced price. The Soviet Union was Cuba's lifeline to emerge from international isolation and to save its economy. All ended up in 1989 when the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba faced once again marginalisation and economic crisis. The serious crisis of Cuban economy lasted for about five years (the first half of the 90's), a period known as the *período especial en tiempos de paz* during which food consumption and the purchase of essential goods were limited and restrictions were applied on hydrocarbons, causing major disruptions throughout the country.

The communist regime faced an ideological crisis too, given the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The collapse of the Soviet model generated an existential crisis for many left-wing parties in the region which, like Cuba, had to thoroughly reassess their ideological foundations, political programmes and strategies for the future (Campos, 2011). Despite this, the Cuban Revolution survived and this was possible thanks to the strong personalistic dimension of that regime. The concentration of power in the hands of Fidel Castro made possible the preservation of socialism as the basis of economic institutions, unlike other countries that had to abandon it. So, it is possible to say

that Cuba represents a communist regime also characterised by neopatrimonialism (Fossati, 2018b).

When Raúl Castro replaced his brother in 2006, the socialist economic institutions and the one-party regime survived, despite the adaptation of the government to the new regional and international scenario and the implementation of some (limited) market opening measures (the possibility of using mobile phones, the access to the internet, the increase of wages and pensions, etc.). Even when Raúl decided to hand over the leadership to Miguel Díaz-Canel, putting an end to the era of the Castro brothers, there was no significant change in the political and social structure of the country, given that the new president always remained faithful to communist party.

## Venezuela

The central element to take into account when we talk about Venezuela is oil, since it is the country with the largest oil reserves in the world; this factor will be a constant in both the economic and political analysis of the country.

Like Cuba, Venezuela faced a period of military dictatorship as well, and it was under Marcos Pérez Jiménez from 1948 to 1958, who was overthrown by a popular uprising which allowed the return to democracy through general elections. Since then, a parliamentary democracy was maintained in Venezuela for about forty years.

During the 1970s the Venezuelan economy grew strongly and steadily as a result of rising oil prices, but since the 1980s the situation changed due to the economic recession caused by the Latin American foreign debt crisis in 1982. The crisis caused reduced imports and wages, high unemployment and inflation: measures such as controlling public spending and money supply were taken but without opening up to foreign trade, preserving the protectionist economic institutions of the *Isi (Import Substitution Industrialization)* characterised by a strong trade closure and (in the 1950s and 1960s) also by radical economic populism (Fossati, 2018a). This situation, compounded by a sharp fall in oil prices, put a stop on the economic growth in Venezuela. After 1989, the social-democratic President Perez launched a package of radical liberal reforms, managed by some technicians called 'IESA boys'<sup>1</sup>. The population was not used to the sacrifices of austerity and a series of riots and protests occurred in February 1989. These pro-

<sup>1</sup> The 'IESA boys' were a group of liberal economists who came from the *Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración* (IESA) and they controlled

the Ministry of Economy and the Central Bank in the early 1990s. The leader of the IESA boys was Moisés Naím, a Venezuelan writer and journalist.

tests were suppressed and the reforms continued, with some success in their initial phase.

In February 1992 there was a military coup against Carlos Andrés Pérez's government organised by Hugo Chávez, founder of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200. Chávez demanded an end to the liberal reforms put in place by the 'IESA boys' and he obtained the dismissal of this economists group but he was imprisoned. A second coup in November guaranteed Chavez's release. It was clear that Venezuela's political and social stability was collapsing. After Perez's impeachment in 1993 there was Caldera's presidency (1994-1999) who managed economic policies inconsistently, implementing a form of moderate populism (Fossati, 2021).

In 1998, Hugo Chávez won the elections and with him there was a return to populism and protectionism. Chavez's populism was radical which, unlike moderate populism, is not compatible with democratic principles. In fact, there was the establishment of an authoritarian regime (Fossati, 2020b). Chavez began to spread his thoughts and ideals, based on a populist, revolutionary and anti-US rhetoric, making economic reforms based on a partial socialism. In the political sphere, the new President saw to it that a new constitution was approved, following a national referendum for the Constituent Assembly, a body in which the opposition was under-represented. The new Constitution strengthened presidentialism (extending the term of office from 5 to 6 years), abolished the Senate, limited parliamentary control over the military apparatus and reduced the autonomy of institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Central Bank and the National Electoral Council. Chavez increased the presence of the State in the economic and social spheres, but despite the authoritarian practices implemented (restriction of civil liberties, control of the judiciary) and the concentration of power in the hands of the president, the regime was not fully authoritarian but hybrid, because it was legitimised by citizens in the elections. During Chavez's presidency Venezuela became an example of 'competitive authoritarianism' in the sense that the main party (PSUV) competed against opposition parties in general elections but at the same time weakened the control mechanisms, reducing the scope of action of the opposition (Corrales, 2015). It was with Maduro that Venezuela implemented a full authoritarian regime even if not with a single party system like Cuba<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Freedom House's data for 2022 Venezuela is classified as a non-free country, with a score of

In the economic field, unemployment remained low and wages were high until 2008 when oil prices fell sharply. Since then,

14/100, where civil liberties and human rights are not guaranteed. The level of repression of opposition is very high, as evidenced by the numerous arrests, attacks and impediments to participate in political activities. As regards Cuba, the presence of a one-party system controlling all spheres of society and limiting freedom of expression clearly shows that the Cuban regime is full-fledged an authoritarian regime. Not surprisingly, its score on the Freedom House scale is even lower than Venezuela's (12/100): there is no political pluralism in Cuba, as all parties are banned (except the Communist Party), independent media are prohibited and dissidents are imprisoned or risk their lives. The Freedom House report (2022) attributes both Venezuela and Cuba a score of 1/40 for political rights while for civil liberties Venezuela has a rating of 13/60 and Cuba 11/60.

taxes have risen, wages have fallen, inflation has increased, and electricity has been rationed, causing a series of blackouts across the country and popular discontent that led to riots and protests. The former vice-president Nicolas Maduro, the new leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (established by Chavez in 2007), became the country's president in the elections following Chavez's death (from cancer) in 2013. Maduro did not have the same charisma as Chavez and the economic crisis deteriorated to the point where basic necessities became difficult to find. Since 2014 there have been popular protests promoted by various members of the opposition parties (led by the right-wing leader Guaidó) and especially by students. The repression by the armed forces left an estimated 300 deaths.

Venezuela's foreign policy has always been conditioned by its dependence on oil and the related price variation. Being the main source of wealth, the policies implemented by the various governments have been structured according to oil revenues. When Hugo Chavez came to power, foreign policy began to be characterised by the ideological component of the radical left (Manichean), producing a revision of principles, objectives and alliances. In previous years Venezuela maintained a very good relationship with the United States, the main buyer of oil, but under Chavez's presidency relations deteriorated because of changes introduced in the oil sector that conflicted with US interests. Chavez, in fact, nationalised the PDVSA company, founded in 1975, which managed the exploration, production, refining and export of Venezuelan oil.

For Venezuela, oil has been an important tool for acting in the international arena. For this reason, we speak of *petrodplomacy* (or *diplomacia del petróleo*) to refer to the instrumental use that Venezuela has made of this resource. Oil diplomacy has been a constant in Venezuelan politics since the 1960s, but it was during the presidency of Hugo Chavez that it was exploited to the full. Chavez's petrodplomacy consisted of using oil, sold at favourable prices, to gain political influence, votes, regional and international support. Venezuelan cooperation was involved in different areas but worth highlighting the trade and aid offered to ALBA member countries (Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines).

<sup>3)</sup> According to Transparency International data, Venezuela has a score of 15/100 on the corruption scale (where 100 indicates the absence of corruption), a decrease of 4 points since 2012. Venezuela is also in 176th place in the ranking of 180 countries, in which the last represents the most corrupt.

Venezuela is a *rentista state*, a term used to refer to countries that obtain revenues from non-productive economic activities and that in most cases more than 40% of revenues derive from a single resource. The main problem of a *rentista state* is the great external dependence in addition to the fact that it relies on only one main source of revenue. This fuelled a strong corruption which infected not only government and public administration officials, but also parties and trade unions even during the democratic phase<sup>3</sup>.

## The relationship between Cuba and Venezuela

Cuba and Venezuela have many similarities both historically and politically, for example:

Dictatorship: both countries had military dictatorships (Fulgencio Batista in Cuba and Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela).

Attempts to seize power by force: in 1992 Chavez attempted a coup to overthrow the government of Carlos Andres Perez, as well as Castro stormed the Moncada Barracks on 26 July 1953.

Two military men who became charismatic leaders (Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez): for both characters, the political image is explicitly associated with the figure of the military leader (Olivia Campos 2011).

The political ideology of the extreme left: communism for Cuba and radical populism for Venezuela. The similarities between Chavismo and Castroism are numerous even if in Cuba it was possible to establish a one-party communist regime while Chavez's Venezuela was initially a hybrid regime characterised by radical populism and partial socialism.

Authoritarianism: both Venezuela and Cuba are currently considered to be countries with authoritarian regimes in which the fundamental freedoms and human rights of citizens are not guaranteed<sup>4</sup>.

Today the two countries are close allies, but in the past they were strong competitors and in some cases even rivals, before becoming good collaborators and business partners. During the years of democracy in Venezuela, the Cuban communist regime

<sup>4)</sup> The latest Freedom House report gives both Venezuela and Cuba a score of 1/40 for political rights while for civil liberties Venezuela has a rating of 13/60 and Cuba 11/60.



often posed a threat. Fidel always showed a strong interest in Venezuela, especially for its oil reserves. In fact, even before the arrival of Chavez, Cuba provided intelligence services to Venezuelan communist groups that were financed and trained by Castro.

Under Romulo Betancourt's presidency (1954-1964), Venezuela's primary objective was the consolidation of democracy and for this it was necessary to put an end to relations with authoritarian governments around the world (Betancourt doctrine), so there was a clear departure from Cuba. At that time, relations between Venezuela and the United States were close, and therefore, in order not to jeopardise this relationship, Betancourt became the main accuser of the Cuban regime, especially regarding interference in internal affairs of Venezuela and other countries (Romero, 2011). In 1961, Venezuela was one of the countries that voted to expel Cuba from the OAS, starting economic sanctions. The motivation for expulsion was the support that the Cuban government was offering to the revolutionary guerrilla movement in Venezuela. Venezuela's far-left political forces began an armed struggle against the regime, as Betancourt declared the Communist Party and the Revolutionary Left Movement illegals. For the Cuban communist regime was the perfect moment to support extreme left-wing movements in the country, with the aim of expanding its influence and ideology. Despite this, Cuba's attempt at autocracy promotion towards Venezuela was unsuccessful: President Rafael Caldera (1969-1974) decided to expand relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. The Betancourt doctrine was abandoned and the conflict between Cuba and Venezuela did not escalate. In the following years, relations were normalised: economic sanctions were lifted, diplomatic and trade relations were re-established and a trilateral oil agreement was signed between Venezuela and the Soviet Union to send oil to Cuba.

Since Chavez's victory in the 1998 presidential elections, Cuba and Venezuela have established a strong alliance and cooperation in all areas (economic, political, social and military). Initially, relations between the two countries were essentially bilateral, focused on trade agreements and on the ideological component (socialism, anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism), but then the objectives of the alliance widened with the intention of expanding its ideology and political model to other Latin American countries. The close ties that were established between Cuba and Venezue-

la replaced the historical relationship that Caracas had with the United States: from 1998 the communist regime became a model to follow for Venezuela and was an important source of aid. For Cuba, too, the alliance became crucial, particularly for the supply of cheap oil.

In 2004, ALBA (initially *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas*’, but in 2009 it became *Alianza Bolivariana de los Pueblos de Nuestra América*’), an alliance of far-left governments in Latin America, was founded. Both countries were looking for an alternative, anti-liberal and anti-American regional integration. Created by Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, the ALBA represented a process of cooperation with a political and strategic purpose: it was an extreme left-wing alliance, aimed at coalescing the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean under the Bolivarian ideology, opposing US initiatives (in particular the ALCA, *Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas*). The following countries joined the organisation: Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador (withdrawn in 2018), Honduras (expelled in 2009), Granada, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Venezuela.

The ALBA is based on five strategic axes: energy (since oil is one of the main elements of the alliance, used by Venezuela as a tool to promote regional integration); social projects (the missions) which were also extended to most of the ALBA countries; the *Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos* (TCP) signed in 2006 with the aim of opposing liberalism and traditional free trade treaties; Telesur, the Venezuelan television channel loaded with ideological content; the ALBA Bank, whose capital is allocated to cultural, health and educational projects.

## Autocracy promotion of the two countries

The alliance between Cuba and Venezuela has acquired strategic importance both bilaterally and in cooperation with other Latin American countries. In addition to supporting each other and sharing the same authoritarian methods, these two countries have been and continue to be, even individually, autocracy promoters to other countries in the region.

Before analysing specifically how Cuba and Venezuela have promoted autocracy, it is worth examining what underlies autocracy promotion and through what methods and mechanisms it is carried out. There are three main motivations for autocrats to support non-democratic allies: ideological commonality, fear of democratic contagion and economic interests (Yakouchyk, 2016). Regarding the ideological motivation, it must be said that with the end of the Cold War it was less and less present, but it was particularly important in the case of Venezuela during the Chavismo era, with the promotion of Bolivarism in Latin America. On the other hand, fear of democratic contagion consists in undermining attempts at democratisation in a country to prevent allied authoritarian regimes from losing their authority and going through crises. The last motivation, economic interests, is the preponderant one and in the case of Venezuela it has played an important role: the sale of oil by the Venezuelan regime is vital for many regimes. The three motivations analysed are united by a fundamental variable: the strengthening of power and influence at regional level.

In this regard, it is useful to consider the concept of authoritarian gravity centres (AGCs), which refers to the attraction and contagion that some regimes exert towards other geographically neighbouring countries. The external actor that exerts attraction towards other countries has the material capacity to spread autocratic ideas, norms, institutional elements and techniques and has a great willingness to influence its neighbours in the region by occupying a central position (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2020). With Chavez, as will be seen, Venezuela became an AGC in Latin America.

In parallel with democratic promotion, autocracy promotion can be carried out in four ways: through incentives (economic and/or military aid), economic blackmail (negative sanctions), through spontaneous emulation or through direct military interventions. The processes through which regimes support each other can be synthesised in the four arenas of International Relations: cultural, economic, political and military. Cultural cooperation is based on common values, which have been central to Latin America, and were even more strong in the case of Cuba and Venezuela, because of their shared '*caribeña*' identity. Economic support is one of the main ones, particularly as regards the supply of ener-

gy resources. At the political level, support can be expressed in various forms: with support within the United Nations through diplomatic tools such as the exchange of votes, with media coverage in favour of authoritarian regimes and with support in local political elections to increase the chances of victory for their allies and conceal any fraud. Military support is carried out with the supply of arms, troops and military equipment with the aim of increasing security but also to facilitate repression and block revolts and/or democratisation attempts.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> K. Yakouchyk (2017), Beyond autocracy promotion: a review, 'Political Studies Review', May 2019, vol.17, no.2, pp. 147-160.

One of the most frequent methods used by authoritarian regimes to ensure that their power does not diminish and can be strengthened outside their borders is the control of information. State control over the media is crucial for autocracy promotion. In authoritarian regimes, information is often monitored by the state, which censors regime-critical contents and mainly transmits messages in favour of it and its allies. An example is the case of the television channel Telesur, founded by Chavez in 2005, based in Venezuela but with international broadcasting. The channel has proved to be an important tool for Venezuelan foreign policy and has received support and funding from other countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay. It also shares information with other TV chains such as Al-Jazeera, RT in Russia and CCTV in China. The main purpose of the channel is to oppose the US media and compete with 'imperialist' information. The channel is considered to be a real means of political propaganda because it is loaded with ideological content.

## Cuba's autocracy promotion

Cuban foreign policy has always been structured according to the objectives and interests of the State and is extremely marked by the conflictual relationship with the United States. The Cuban regime wanted to remain faithful to the socialist principles of the Revolution, so it faced many difficulties in integrating and relating with other countries, also due to the propaganda put in place by the United States to denigrate and make the regime more and more isolated. Nevertheless, over the years the regime managed to diversify its foreign policy without undermining the system established with the Revolution. Cuba developed a strong international activism with the aim of "exporting the Revolution", ac-

accompanied by a marked nationalism and influenced by the confrontation with the hegemonic power of the United States.

Since the 1960s, autocracy promotion has been a fundamental element of Cuban foreign policy: the communist regime supported far-left governments and trained revolutionary movements not only in Latin America but also in Africa. In this case, Cuban autocracy promotion falls into the category of incentives, as it was implemented through military assistance and logistical support to guerrilla groups during colonial and post-colonial wars (Prevost, 2011).

During the Cold War, the main factor behind Cuban autocracy promotion was the ideology: aid offered to other countries was used as a tool to forge links with potential communist regimes with socialist economic institutions in order to increase their influence. In addition, Cuba needed to find an ally in the region to carry on its fight against the United States, so it offered help to various extreme left-wing movements in some countries in Central and South America.

After 1989, with the fall of the USSR, Cuba, remained without its main ally, was forced to moderate its revolutionary attitude because it needed to establish relations in the international arena in order to emerge from isolation. With the end of the Cold War, the Cuban regime was forced to establish relations with other countries without taking into account the communist ideology and without relying on regime sharing, so it started to cooperate with different types of regimes, including democracies. For this reason, after 1989 Cuba ceased to openly support revolutionary groups and governments, weakening the promotion of autocracy and becoming mainly a beneficiary of autocracy promotion.

Cuba attempted to carry out autocracy promotion towards Venezuela in the years of democracy, again through incentives, by giving support to armed military groups. The forces of the extreme left, which had been excluded from Venezuelan politics by Romolo Betancourt, organised themselves in an armed guerrilla warfare against the government which would last until the second half of the 1960s. The help offered by Cuba by sending volunteers proved useless, partly due to the fact that in 1973 President Caldera put in place a pacification process by integrating the subversive forces into Venezuelan politics. It is clear that Cuban autocra-

cy promotion did not succeed in Venezuela but, on the contrary, caused Cuba's expulsion from the OAS.

On the other hand, Cuba's autocracy promotion had great results in Nicaragua in 1979 with the Sandinista Revolution. The *Sandinista National Liberation Front* (FSLN), a communist and anti-American military group, put an end to the dictatorial Somoza dynasty by installing an extreme left-wing government. Cuba saw in the Sandinista Front an opportunity to export the communist regime and to strike the United States, allies and supporters of the Somozas. For this reason, since the foundation of the FSLN in 1962 Fidel communicated with the leaders of the group. The Cuban regime began to train and send human resources to the FSLN and kepted doing it even after the victory of the Sandinistas and the establishment of the new government, an aid which was essential for Nicaragua's development. In this case, Cuban aid was not only limited to the sending of soldiers, but there was also political assistance: in 1978, Cuban leaders mediated the unification of the FSLN, which had been divided into three fractions since 1973. In this way, once in power, the revolutionaries could count on the support of the Cuban regime, both for material aid and for political advice and counsel (Domínguez Reyes, 1990). Again, Cuba's autocracy promotion falls into the category of incentives, since it was implemented through military, economic and political aid.

The victory of the Sandinista Revolution triggered a wave of optimism throughout the Latin American extreme left. Between the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba offered support to communist opposition groups in El Salvador (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*) and Guatemala (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*). In these two cases, however, autocracy promotion did not have the same results as in Nicaragua: The Revolution did not win and the establishment of an extreme left-wing government did not take place, but there were two terrible civil wars.

As soon as the Sandinistas won in 1979, Cuba began to show its support and solidarity with Daniel Ortega's government by sending teachers, nurses, military advisers and later agreements were signed for economic, scientific and technical assistance (Domínguez Reyes, 1990). Ortega's plan was to bring about a change in the country's economic and social institutions, thus the

first reforms were introduced, such as the nationalisation of industries, agrarian reform and education reform.

However, it must be specified that Nicaragua did not immediately become an authoritarian regime because Ortega decided to share power with the other military forces that took part in the guerrilla war against Somoza, so the Government Council had a pluralist composition. In 1984, the first presidential elections after the Sandinista Revolution took place and Ortega was elected President of Nicaragua: from that moment there was a progressive centralisation of power in Ortega's hands with the consequent limitation of civil liberties and political rights until 1990.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Freedom House data. Status of Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990: *Partly Free* (score: 1= free; 7= not free)  
*Political Rights*: 1979: 5 - 1980: 5 - 1981/82: 6 - 1982/83: 6 - 1983/84: 5 - 1984/85: 5 - 1985/86: 5 - 1986/87: 5 - 1987/88: 5 - 1988/89: 5 - 1990: 3  
*Civil Liberties*: 1979: 5 - 1980: 5 - 1981/82: 5 - 1982/83: 5 - 1983/84: 5 - 1984/85: 5 - 1985/86: 6 - 1986/87: 5 - 1987/88: 4 - 1988/89: 5 - 1990: 3

Cuban military aid was crucial, especially from 1980 when the US began to organise and fund counter-revolutionary groups called *Contras*. The Sandinista army was not ready to face an external threat, so military aid from Cuba and the USSR was needed. The Reagan administration was committed to preventing the emergence of another communist and pro-Cuban regime in Latin America, so from the end of 1981 the CIA began to supply arms to the former military of the Somoza dictatorship, preparing counter-revolutionary forces and organising the fight against the Sandinista regime, called *the Contras*. For the Cuban regime it was important that the Revolution in Nicaragua survived, in order to maintain a secure ally in the region, and the fear of direct intervention by the United States, fuelled by the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, caused a strengthening of Cuban aid to the Sandinista government. Although there is no official data to confirm this, it is estimated that there were more than 2500-3000 Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua, located at all levels of the army and within the Ministry of the Interior (Dominguez Reyes, 1990). The sending of arms by the USSR and the assistance offered by the Cuban military advisers were crucial in transforming the Sandinista army into a significant fighting force (Prevost, 1990). Attacks by the *contras* throughout the country gave rise to a war that only ended in 1990 with the defeat of the Sandinistas in the elections and the victory of Violeta Chamorro.

After three consecutive electoral defeats (in 1990, 1996 and 2001), Ortega was re-elected President of Nicaragua in 2006 and is still in office after four re-elections, the last one in November 2021. His government is characterised by the complete subordination of institutions and norms to the political project of his

party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front. Already after his first re-election, Ortega gained full control of two key state bodies: The Supreme Court of Justice and the Supreme Electoral Council. In addition, the FSLN's victory in the 2011 elections for a majority in the National Assembly gave the President the possibility of making his term of office almost 'life-long': in 2013 he amended the points in the Constitution that blocked the possibility of a second and third term in succession to the first, establishing strong presidentialism without constitutional restrictions. The situation in Nicaragua was also affected by Venezuela's autocracy promotion: Chavez immediately established strong ties with Ortega, supporting him during the 2005 election campaign and quickly becoming an ally, guide and protector of the new president. Immediately after Ortega's election, the country was incorporated into ALBA and relations with Cuba were re-established, after being weakened under Violeta Chamorro's government.

## Venezuela's autocracy promotion

Chavez's goal was to make Venezuela an example to follow in Latin America, promoting the Chavista model based on Bolivarian ideology and radical populism. As soon as he was elected president of the country, he set his project in motion, spreading his ideals based on populist, revolutionary and anti-liberal rhetoric. From the beginning he showed his interest in 'almost' socialist economic institutions until in 2005 he officially proclaimed his *Socialism of the 21st Century*, referring to the political line adopted by him and his party. Chavez strove to change Venezuela's economic institutions and political regime under the umbrella of the Bolivarian Revolution (Kneuer, 2021). The president's economic policies established a system characterised by strong trade protectionism and partial socialism, with some targeted nationalisations, but preserving private property.

Chavez wanted to expand his influence throughout the Latin American region, exporting his revolutionary ideology characterised by an authoritarian political model and protectionist and 'almost' socialist economic institutions (Kneuer, 2021). For this reason, Venezuela's foreign policy from 1998 onwards was characterised by a continuous search for alliances at the regional level,



on the basis of ‘revolutionary solidarity’. Rising oil prices gave Chavez the opportunity to help his allies economically and increased his influence in the region by creating trade links through ‘petro-diplomacy’. The majority of Venezuela’s autocracy promotion was achieved through the *Petrocaribe* alliance, through which the Chavista regime attempted to export its regime model to the region. *Petrocaribe* is an oil alliance founded in 2005 by Chavez and composed of 17 member states. Used as a geopolitical tool by Venezuela, this energy cooperation initiative aimed to transform the Caribbean and Central America into a single negotiating bloc to establish strategic alliances. PDVSA sold oil to Petrocaribe member states, which had 25 years to pay for it, with an interest rate of 1 or 2 per cent. The money sent to Venezuela was paid into the Alba-Caribe Fund and then used for development projects in health, education and energy in the member countries.

In order to achieve his goals, Chavez founded the ALBA together with Fidel Castro: bringing together several Latin American countries in a single organisation based on a left-wing ideology perfectly suited to the Venezuelan president’s project. After transforming the country’s political and economic system, it was necessary to export the transformation process to other Latin American countries through autocracy promotion.

Chavez attempted to create a Latin American bloc to counter US hegemony and he did so by reminding the ideals of Simón Bolívar: the dream of a united Latin America, the idea of regional integration and the independence of peoples, the principles of unity and solidarity (Kneuer, 2021).

As regarding the relationship with the Cuban regime<sup>7</sup>, from 1999 it was Venezuela under Chavez that implemented autocracy promotion towards Cuba, which from 1989 became mainly a receiver and no longer an active promoter as it had been during the Cold War. Chavez’s autocracy promotion was especially successful in Bolivia and Ecuador, where two hybrid regimes were established, which imitated Venezuela’s populism, although in a more moderate form.<sup>8</sup> Venezuela’s autocracy promotion was weaker than the Cuban one and had fewer results. It was implemented through *soft power* (economic incentives), not *hard power* (direct military intervention). Nevertheless, Venezuela played a dominant role in economic incentives due to the enormous presence of oil in the territory, which allowed the country to use it

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that cooperation between Cuba and Venezuela has reached all areas: politics, culture, energy, health, economics and telecommunications. The main agreement concerned the sending of qualified Cuban health and educational personnel to assist the less developed sectors of Venezuelan society and in return Venezuela provided oil and equipment necessary for the development of the island. Another central element were the social projects undertaken in Venezuela to help the poorest: the *misiones*, which, in addition to assisting a large part of Venezuelan society with the help of Cuban professionals, were also an instrument of Bolivarian ideology. The main missions were undertaken in the fields of health and education, for example, the *Misión Barrio Adentro* made it possible to build new hospitals and health centres, the *Misión Robinson* achieved the literacy of about one and a half million Venezuelans and with the *Misión Milagro* more than three million people recovered their sight.

<sup>8</sup> F. Fossati (2020), Populism as the post-Marxist adaptation of left-ist Manicheanism, ‘Revista euro latino-americana de análisis social y político’, June 2020, vol.1, no.1, pp. 87-104.

instrumentally to promote autocracy and increase power at the regional level.

In the area of military incentives, however, the Cuban regime has the upper hand: thanks to the experience gained during the Cold War years, it sent its military to train the Venezuelan army and keep it under control.<sup>9</sup> It is no coincidence that during the 2002 demonstrations and the post-2014 ‘democratic revolution’ the armed forces maintained their loyalty to Chavez and Maduro. Finally, in the political sphere there was more symmetry as the two countries have supported each other since 1999, although Venezuela has been more adept to exert more influence towards other Latin American countries thanks to oil diplomacy.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to sending doctors and teachers, Cuba also sent intelligence personnel to work throughout Venezuelan territory. An intelligence service was created (*Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar*, DGCIM) which, thanks to the assistance of the Cuban military, ensured the formation of an espionage system to watch over the Venezuelan troops. A paramilitary organisation, *Los Círculos Bolivarianos*, was also set up with the aim of defending the Bolivarian Revolution, which had the same structure and shared the same violent methods as the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* created by the Cuban communist regime.

The first country towards which Chavez implemented autocracy promotion was Bolivia. The support given to Evo Morales (elected president of Bolivia in 2006) and his party MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*) was already evident during the election campaign, when Chavez provided funding, recommendations and security personnel. As Morales reported in an interview, Chavez’s political support was crucial as he taught him, through his advice, to fight the ‘American empire’ and to turn the ruling elite into the opposition (Kneuner, 2021). When Morales won the elections, Chavez’s goal had been achieved: Bolivia was governed by a president who shared the populist ideology of the extreme left. The Venezuelan president began to steer Morales towards a constitutional change in the country: in 2006, Chavez publicly declared that in Bolivia ‘the old system had collapsed and it was necessary to create a new democracy, a new republic and a new society’ and that Venezuela was an example to follow. For Morales, the Venezuelan president represented not only a political ally but also a moral guide, and in fact the new president began to introduce changes in Bolivia’s political and institutional set-up following the Chavista model. In 2006, the Bolivarian Congress issued a special law to convene a Constitutional Assembly, where Morales’ coalition had a majority (De la Torre, 2017). Nevertheless, the Constitution was reformed through negotiation with the Congress, which was controlled by opposition parties. The constitutional reform process ended in 2009 when the new Constitution was finally approved, introducing the so-called ‘*indigenist model*’, the rejection of privatisation, the nationalisation of the energy sector and the increase of the presidential term to 5 years (Article 168

of the Constitution lifts the ban on direct presidential re-election and allows for an automatic second term) (Kneuer, 2021).

Following the same methods used with Morales, Chavez also supported Rafael Correa and his populist party *Movimiento Alianza País* in the 2006 presidential elections in Ecuador. The Venezuelan president sent economic aid to the candidate in the election campaign and a few months before the elections there was a meeting between the two in Caracas, during which agreements were prepared to guarantee assistance to Ecuador in the field of hydrocarbons. Following Chavez's example, once he had won the elections, Correa used the referendum mechanism to authorise the convocation of a Constitutional Assembly, despite congressional opposition to the use of this method (De la Torre, 2017). Unlike in Bolivia, the Constitution was completely reformed according to the will of the President.

In these two cases, Chavez's autocracy promotion towards Bolivia and Ecuador falls mainly into the category of incentives (economic aid and political assistance during the electoral campaigns and after the election).

According to de la Torre (2017) Morales and Correa learned populist strategies from Chavez to make the regime's transition effective and strengthen it:

- the convocation of a Constituent Assembly to initiate a process of constitutional reform: the new Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador established a new type of democracy, in which elections were maintained but power was strongly concentrated in the hands of the President;
- call frequent elections to consolidate their power;
- the use of laws in a discriminatory way in order to colonise civil society, silence critical voices and attack the opposition;
- resorting to state intervention to redistribute wealth and reduce poverty;
- the orientation of its foreign policy towards anti-liberalism, national sovereignty and Latin American integration: indeed, both Bolivia and Ecuador quickly joined the ALBA.

Chavez was able to offer economic support to his new allies thanks to the oil revenues that Venezuela was enjoying at the time. But all this gave rise to a system of corruption that spread

from Venezuela to other Latin American countries. The money sent by the Chavista regime was to be used for social projects, but of course it was also used to reward the ruling elite: in Bolivia, for example, the money ended up directly in the hands of the president's minister and was used to strengthen Morales' image in the country (Kneuer, 2021). However, Morales and Correa's populism remained more moderate than Chavez's: in Ecuador and Bolivia, the main economic indicators (e.g. inflation) remained under control, avoiding authoritarian transition. In fact, the two countries remained hybrid regimes<sup>10</sup> (Fossati, 2020).

<sup>10</sup>) Freedom House data:

- Bolivia: before Morales was elected, the country was classified as free, with a score from 1 to 3. From 2003 onwards, it was considered partially free, with a fixed score of 3, which remained constant until 2021, with a slight deterioration only in 2014 and 2015.
- Ecuador: the country was classified as partially free in 2000, when the score stabilised at 3. Only in 2016 there was a deterioration, with a score of 4 for civil liberties.

<sup>11</sup>) Both projects are part of social missions, implemented with the help of Cuban professionals.

As mentioned above, Chavez also carried out autocracy promotion towards Nicaragua, especially after 2007 with the re-election of Daniel Ortega. A political and economic friendship was established between Chavez and Ortega, based on anti-liberal rhetoric and the fight for the freedom of Latin American peoples (Berger, 2018). Nicaragua's immediate incorporation into the ALBA was another success for Chavez, as his project continued to expand further and further. So began the cooperation between Nicaragua and Venezuela, both in the commercial sphere (e.g. with the sale of oil) but also in the social sphere: '*Operación Milagro*' enabled a large part of the population to recover their sight and the literacy campaign '*Yo si puedo*' succeeded in literating more than 80% of the Nicaraguan population (Ayerdis, 2018)<sup>11</sup>.

With Chavez, the 'authoritarian transition' began in Venezuela, starting with an electoral democracy (which lasted until 1998), which then turned into an electoral autocracy, until it reached full autocracy. In Nicaragua, the process of regression of democracy under Ortega was similar, while in Ecuador, under Correa, there was a major recession but no full autocracy. In Bolivia, the regression took place less rapidly, but with the election of Morales in 2006, started an electoral autocracy. In all these countries, Chavez was a guide and an inspiration (Kneuer, 2021).

Under Chavez's presidency, Venezuela played the role of an 'authoritarian gravity centre' as it succeeded in spreading its ideology, authoritarian methods and institutional strategies to several countries in the region, as the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua show. The two strengths of Chavez's autocracy promotion were basically oil revenues and his charisma.

As regards the autocracy promotion carried out by Maduro, it must be said that it was less effective both because the new pres-

<sup>12)</sup> After the death of Chavez and the election of Maduro, the relationship with the Cuban regime also changed. Cuba continued to support Maduro's regime, which stands up thanks to Cuban intelligence, as it controlled the military ensuring that they would not speak out in favour of the opposition. Nevertheless, the recent Venezuelan crisis had undermined several aspects of the relationship, for example causing a significant reduction in trade due to Venezuela's lack of resources. Maduro could no longer afford to send oil at preferential prices either to Cuba or to Petrocaribe member countries, causing problems also within the ALBA.

<sup>13)</sup> Freedom House data showing the increase in the authoritarian nature of Nicaragua since 2016 (became a completely authoritarian country after 2018):

*Political Rights:* 2015: 4 - 2016: 5 - 2017: 5 - 2018: 6 - 2019: 6 - 2020: 6

*Civil Liberties:* 2015: 3 - 2016: 4 - 2017: 4 - 2018: 5 - 2019: 5 - 2020: 5

ident had less charisma and because Venezuela lost the regional influence it had, due to the serious economic, political and institutional crisis that hit the country<sup>12</sup>.

Ortega's regime in Nicaragua remained hybrid until 2015 but it increased the authoritarian methods in 2016, when power was concentrated in the hands of the president through control of parliament and the Supreme Court.<sup>13</sup> This provoked a series of protests in 2018 which were brutally repressed killing more than 400 people. As Guanella (2021) states, in Nicaragua there is a dictatorship camouflaged as democracy: there are still elections but there is a real manhunt against those who oppose the Ortega government, which is now in its fourth consecutive term.

Starting from June 2021 repression has become even stronger: in the run-up to the elections on 7 November (from which Ortega emerged victorious once again), opposition candidates were hunted down, including Cristiana Chamorro, the daughter of the former president, who is currently under house arrest. Any critical voices were silenced, several academics, journalists and activists were arrested with the aim of avoiding new riots and keeping Ortega in power, despite his declining popularity.

The alliance between Nicaragua and Cuba continued and the two regimes are still supporting each other. When the European Union imposed sanctions against Nicaragua's vice-president and other Nicaraguan citizens, Cuba and Venezuela were quick to condemn the European action and show solidarity with the country. Similarly, when the Cuban regime was hit by a series of protests across the country in July 2021, Ortega showed his support for Cuban President Diaz Canel. Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua share several characteristics, including an extreme left-wing political orientation, the use of authoritarian methods and the repression of dissent.

A significant event was the change of president in Peru, which altered the balance in the region, intensifying relations with Maduro's Venezuela. Following the election of Pedro Castillo to the presidency in July 2021, the new government withdrew from the Lima Group, re-establishing diplomatic relations with Venezuela. The Lima Group was born in 2017 with the aim of supporting the Venezuelan opposition in achieving internal political change and bringing together Latin American countries that do not recognise Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela and that support Guaidó. The new Peruvian president clearly showed his

<sup>14)</sup> Recently, a government crisis also arose as Peruvian Vice-Chancellor Luis Enrique Chavez departed from the government line, stating that no legitimate authority is recognised in Venezuela, while the Vice-Minister denied this statement, saying that it does not absolutely represent the position of the Peruvian government.

intention to change his policy towards Venezuela; in fact, at the end of September 2021 Castillo met with Maduro to define cooperation between the two countries<sup>14</sup>. Castillo also declared that he would work to find a solution to the situation of Venezuelan migrants living in Peru: Maduro proposed to the Peruvian president to cooperate in the implementation of a 'return to homeland' plan with the aim of repatriating thousands of Venezuelans.

Venezuela could implement new strategies of autocracy promotion towards Peru, but given the country's economic and political situation, it is difficult for Maduro to offer economic aid and political assistance in the same way as Chavez did in previous years.

Lopez Obrador also recently offered his help to Pedro Castillo, assuming a major change in the Mexican government's strategy.

## The role of other Latin American governments

The current Venezuelan conflict has also affected the map of alliances in Latin America. Despite the support that most European countries and the United States have given to Guaidó, other countries and paramilitary organisations have remained on Maduro's side. The main ally remains Cuba, whose control over the armed forces allows Maduro to remain in power. As for Colombia, Maduro supported the armed struggle of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), jeopardising the peace agreement signed with the government after more than 50 years of guerrilla warfare, and he also offered material aid to the National Liberation Army (ELN): consequently, these armed rebel groups have maintained their loyalty to the Venezuelan regime, while Colombian President Ivan Duque was among the first to recognise Juan Guaidó as a legitimate president. With the defeat of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation in El Salvador, Venezuela lost another ally, as the new president Nayib Bukele decided to break off diplomatic relations with the country. Hence, Maduro remains with the support of Ortega's Nicaragua. As regard Mexico, under the previous government of Peña Nieto relations with Venezuela were rather conflictual, but the current president López Obrador, leader of the *Movimiento Regeneración*

*Nacional* (MORENA, a party further to the left of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*), initially decided to act as a mediator in the Venezuelan conflict, declaring himself neutral, although he later tilted in favour of Maduro, refusing firstly to sign the Lima Group document denouncing the illegitimacy of the President's new mandate, secondly to apply sanctions and finally to recognise Guaidó. Most European countries continued to support Guaidó, as did the United States with Biden who, contrary to predictions, maintained the same policy line as Trump towards Venezuela, guaranteeing the recognition of Guaidó and condemning Maduro. With the election of the new centre-right president Lacalle Pou in 2020, Uruguay also became part of the list of countries siding with the Venezuelan opposition. Lacalle changed his relations with the countries of the region, adopting a hard-line policy towards left-wing countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. In particular, Lacalle immediately showed his support for Guaidó and openly declared his intention to withdraw from the *Mecanismo de Montevideo*, an initiative promoted by former Uruguayan president Vazquez and Lopez Obrador in 2019, aimed at resolving the Venezuelan situation without external interference, promoting internal political dialogue. It is clear, therefore, that Venezuela's political crisis is decisively undermining the balance of Latin America and relations between countries, dividing the region into supporters and opponents of the Maduro regime, without the presence of resolute mediators. As we have seen, Obrador's Mexico initially declared itself to be neutral and aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the crisis, but over time implemented policies that disproved these declarations.

Obrador also showed his support for the Cuban government when the country was hit by protests. When Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the presidential elections in 2018, great changes were introduced in the country, which for the first time in Mexico's modern history was governed by a left-wing president, and the country began to play a fundamental role in the current Latin American scenario. A rapprochement with other left-wing governments in the region began, as shown by the recognition given to Maduro and the decision to offer political asylum to former Bolivian president Evo Morales in 2019. One event that caused quite a stir was Cuban President Diaz Canel's invitation to Mex-

ico in September 2021, which represented a blow to democracy given the lack of free elections on the island for more than 62 years. Similarly, in 2018, the Mexican president invited Maduro, thus hampering Latin America's diplomatic efforts to isolate the Venezuelan president.

On 18 September 2021, the sixth summit of CELAC (*Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*) took place, during which a kind of division of Latin America into two blocs was noted. On the one hand there are the countries belonging to ALBA (including Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba) and on the other those in the Lima Group (Ecuador, Colombia, Paraguay, Costa Rica). These two factions follow different political lines, often conflicting. During the summit, Uruguayan President Lacalle was very critical of the presidents of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, reproaching their clearly undemocratic political actions (Ortiz, 2021).

In short, Venezuela maintains close relations with Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru and the Bolivia of Luis Arce (MAS party), the new Bolivarian president since November 2020, with whom relations, interrupted with the previous government of Jeanine Añez, were re-established. During the 20th ALBA summit on 14 December, Maduro proposed the start of an economic integration between Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, based on the ALBA Bank and the creation of a common currency (*sucre*). During the summit, there have been accusations against the US government, stating that Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are 'the victims of attacks by the empire of the north'. These three authoritarian regimes, allied with Arce's Bolivia and Castillo's Peru, share revolutionary and populist rhetoric and form a kind of 'left-wing bloc' in Latin America that influences regional dynamics and democratisation efforts. In contrast, Ecuador with Moreno switched to a pro-democracy and pro-liberal coalition, entering into agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the election of Guillermo Lasso as president in May 2021 brought back the right to power, creating a pro-liberal government.

## Conclusions

The analysis carried out highlights the strategic importance of the relationship between Cuba and Venezuela, both bilaterally and in cooperation with other Latin American countries. It



has been seen that autocracy promotion is a central element in the alliance between the two countries and has been implemented through various instruments, among which the ALBA and Petrocaribe stand out. Autocracy promotion, as we saw, can be implemented through four methods: three of *soft power* (incentives, imitation and economic blackmail) and one of hard power (direct military intervention). Over the years, this phenomenon changed according to the international context of the moment or to the internal situation of the country. Until 1989 Cuba was a country that promoted autocracy and implemented autocracy promotion based essentially on the category of incentives (financing and military aid by sending arms and men) but also through political assistance (in the case of Nicaragua). With the end of the Cold War, Cuba became a receiver, while Venezuela, starting with the election of Chavez, began to implement its autocracy promotion, carried out mainly through incentives (such as the political assistance offered to the new presidents Ortega, Morales and Correa)<sup>15</sup>. In the countries where the promotion of autocracy by Cuba and Venezuela was successful (e.g. Nicaragua) profound changes were made to the political and social structure causing a transformation in the equilibrium and dynamics throughout the region. Cuba and Venezuela support authoritarian regimes (such as Ortega's Nicaragua) but are also allied with hybrid regimes (Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru)<sup>16</sup>. It should be noted that Cuba's autocracy promotion has been more rigid and selective, being mainly directed towards other communist (authoritarian) regimes, while Venezuela has also supported hybrid regimes (such as Bolivia and Ecuador) and democracies, such as Cristina Kirchner's Argentina, a populist (moderate) democratic regime. Finally, it has been seen that the current scenario in Latin America is constantly evolving according to internal political changes in the various countries (e.g. the election of a new president and the consequent change in political orientation), causing a transformation of alliances and rivalries in the region.

<sup>15</sup> Chavez's incentives were stronger towards Bolivia (a poorer country), while towards Ecuador they were weaker, since it is an oil-exporting country with a more stable economy.

<sup>16</sup> Freedom House data (2020):

PAESE	CLASSIFICAZIONE (PUNTEGGIO TOTALE)	DIRITTI POLITICI	LIBERTÀ CIVILI
Nicaragua	Non libero (30/100)	10/40	20/60
Bolivia	Parzialmente libero (66/100)	27/40	39/60
Ecuador	Parzialmente libero (67/100)	27/40	40/60
Perù	Parzialmente libero (71/100)	29/40	42/60

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