

# DEEPENING THE RESPONSE TO AUTHORITARIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

// IRIA PUYOSA / MARIVÍ MARÍN VÁZQUEZ / ED. ADAM FIVENSON



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## CONTENTS

**Introduction: Lessons from Latin America in Countering  
Authoritarian Information Manipulation / Adam Fivenson** . . . . . 1

**Cross-Regional Authoritarian Collaboration  
in Latin American Information Spaces / Iria Puyosa** . . . . . 5

**Deepening Civil Society’s Response to Authoritarian  
Information Manipulation / Mariví Marín Vázquez** . . . . . 16

Endnotes . . . . . 25

About the Contributors . . . . . 28

Acknowledgments . . . . . 29

Photo Credits . . . . . 29

On the cover: A mural painted on a wall by members of The Pebble Collective supporting Vladimir Putin in Caracas, Venezuela.





# INTRODUCTION: LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA IN COUNTERING AUTHORITARIAN INFORMATION MANIPULATION

// **ADAM FIVENSON**, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC STUDIES, NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY (EDITOR)

Authoritarian governments are escalating their efforts to manipulate the information ecosystem globally in order to undermine democratic institutions, advance their own interests, and buttress their autocratic allies. In Latin America, where there has been significant democratic backsliding in recent years, malign information operations backed by the Russian government and sometimes the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) draw on well-worn narratives of Western imperialism to attack democracy. These narratives are carried by a Russian-built communications infrastructure which floods news wires, television programming, social media platforms, and other channels with made-for-export material that aims to make authoritarian systems and their repressive leaders appear desirable.<sup>1</sup>

Amid the deluge, work by civil society-led initiatives to secure the integrity of the information space in Latin America is intensifying. Current efforts mostly focus on innovations in fact-checking efforts and reinvigorating broken models of independent journalism. However, the essays in this report, by two leading experts on Latin America's information environment, suggest that these efforts may not be enough to counter intensifying authoritarian efforts to manipulate information spaces to their benefit. In confronting increased collaboration by global authoritarian actors and their regional allies, the development of diverse civil society-led coalitions and new skill sets focused on highlighting and countering authoritarian influence is critical.

Photo: A man stands next to a mural reading "China Aid: For a Shared Future" near the construction site of the new Chinese-funded Salvadoran National Library.

## Growing collaboration between global and regional authoritarian actors

In her essay, **Iria Puyosa** argues that collaboration between the Russian and Chinese governments and their regional authoritarian counterparts, such as those in Venezuela and Cuba, is driving information manipulation around the region. Such collaboration is not limited to the amplification of pro-Russian narratives—in fact, campaigns which boost local authoritarian narratives may be of greater concern for democracies. These efforts may include ideological support, technical assistance, direct amplification, and funding.

New malign information operations by authoritarian powers are a feature of growing economic, political, and military ties between such actors. These ties are expanded through cooperative efforts to launch alternative multilateral regional institutions, such as the China-CELAC Forum and the BRICS. Through their efforts, these regimes seek to normalize a nondemocratic vision and language of governance—one hostile to core democratic ideals like the protection of human rights, the rule of law, and free and fair elections. By cooperatively advancing narratives that undermine democracy and bolster domestic authoritarian powers through alternative regional fora, global and regional authoritarian actors accelerate democratic backsliding.

Puyosa's analysis documents key examples of such collaboration, including Russian efforts to leverage regional audiences which it has cultivated for years to bolster authoritarian narratives. Key goals include discrediting political actors who support democracy; promoting those who would tear down democratic institutions; deflecting international accountability for the illegal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine; and advancing an authoritarian vision of the world.

Across Latin America, Moscow has proven its ability to reach larger audiences than most popular regional and global outlets. RT en Español's Facebook page, for example, has more likes than any other major Spanish-language international broadcaster. The outlet's TikTok account is enormously popular among Spanish-language media with 48 million likes at the time of writing, more than the U.S.-based Telemundo and Univision as well as Spain's *El País*.<sup>2</sup> Moscow's messaging through RT en Español is amplified by regional outlets such as Venezuela's TeleSur—a 24-hour news channel available across much of Latin America that aims to compete with CNN and BBC, and which advances the illiberal ideological perspectives of the Venezuelan regime and its allies.<sup>3</sup>

Puyosa further documents CCP efforts in Latin America's information space, which aim to promote the idea that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a benign world power with whom cooperation can bring economic benefit. To this end, Beijing's efforts, like Moscow's, seek to undermine democratic institutions such as independent media, competitive elections that allow citizens to hold leaders accountable, as well as any individuals liable to point out authoritarian abuses. These efforts are carried out in part by Xinhua Español and CGTN, both of which are owned by the Chinese government, and are dedicated to attacking

liberalism in Latin America, promoting official PRC rhetoric, advancing Chinese geopolitical efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and amplifying allied authoritarian governments in the region—all under the guise of political neutrality.<sup>4</sup>

## **New forms of democratic response are necessary to tackle an intensifying challenge**

In our second piece, **Mariví Marín Vázquez** of the digital observatory ProBox argues that efforts to secure the integrity of the information space and defend democracy in Latin America are critical, but that current approaches are not sufficient to prevail in the face of the intensifying and well-funded challenge posed by authoritarian information operations. While fact checking, independent journalism, and media literacy programs can help dispel confusion in the information space, they alone are unlikely to outpace growing collaboration among global and regional authoritarian powers that are seeking to achieve a definitive advantage in the modern information ecosystem.

Marín provides a compelling outline of the dangers posed by authoritarian innovation, where information operations are no longer built solely on a foundation of outright lies. Instead, narratives aimed at harming a particular individual or cause may be based on true information, but take that information out of context, elevate it over topics more relevant to current events, or through simple repetition lay a sinister pall over otherwise benign activities.

If civil society is to prevail over this increasingly sophisticated challenge, it must augment current fact-checking initiatives, journalism, media literacy, and other similar projects with the latest strategies, innovations, and technologies. For example, greater attention to the sources of antidemocratic information initiatives—revelations that a smear campaign against a local political candidate in Latin America is funded from Russia, for example—can help news consumers reach their own conclusions about that item’s validity, and highlight the efforts of foreign powers to attack democracy. Open-source intelligence training (OSINT) for journalists and researchers can help harness publicly available data to expose information campaigns and the complicity of local actors with aggressive, antidemocratic authoritarian powers. These and more are critical and underutilized strategies for civil society active in defending the information space across Latin America, and comprise important components of an effective response to attacks on democracy.

## **Key lessons from Latin America’s regional response**

The essays in this report deepen our understanding of the escalating and evolving threats posed by global authoritarianism. While responses to authoritarian information manipulation have been robust in many ways across Latin America, much more can be done to counter it and enhance the quality of information available to citizens, particularly around elections. Key lessons include:

- **Authoritarians are increasingly collaborating to undermine democracy.** Global authoritarian powers are investing massive resources in support of partner regimes who share their goals of undermining democracy at the

regional level. A key component of the autocrats' wide-ranging effort is the production and dissemination of media narratives that question democracy, elevate authoritarian rule, and aim to challenge the legitimacy of core democratic tenets such as the separation of powers, rule of law, free and fair elections, and human rights. Such collaboration often also includes the provision of new digital technologies for repression, as well as economic and military partnerships.

- **Democratic actors must cooperate to address the speed and scale of the challenge to democracy.** No single organization has all the necessary tools, knowledge, and experience to counter the increasing speed and scale of authoritarian information operations. Cross-disciplinary collaboration among civil society—journalists, fact checkers, researchers, data analysts, experts in artificial intelligence, sociologists, and strategic communicators, among others—is critical to building resilient democratic institutions and managing new challenges such as those that will accompany the spread of generative artificial intelligence. Democratic governments also play a critical role in facilitating such innovative forms of collaboration through direct engagement, technical support, and funding, as has been seen recently in Ukraine.
- **Strategic responses to authoritarian information operations are essential.** As authoritarian actors expand their influence, civil society-led initiatives that correct misrepresentations in the information space, such as fact checking and independent journalism, may not be enough. Strategic, proactive responses that provide context and historical perspective to explain why such narratives may harm citizens and their democracy are essential to supporting democratic cohesion and defending the integrity of the information space.

Authoritarians are increasingly emboldened in their drive to undermine democracy. The experience of Latin America, where there are many vulnerable democracies, is a critical example of how authoritarians use information and ideas to project influence in ways that are deeply corrosive to democracy. While the world waits for the scaling of legal and regulatory remedies that might ameliorate some of the top-order challenges in the information space, civil society's role becomes increasingly critical. To succeed in securing the integrity of the information space in support of democratic standards—in Latin America and elsewhere around the globe where democracy is under threat—civil society must unlock new forms of innovation to confront the evolving forms of authoritarian influence reshaping the information environment.





# CROSS-REGIONAL AUTHORITARIAN COLLABORATION IN LATIN AMERICAN INFORMATION SPACES

// **IRIA PUYOSA**, SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, DIGITAL FORENSIC RESEARCH LAB, ATLANTIC COUNCIL

## INTRODUCTION

Latin America has experienced significant democratic backsliding in the past two decades. Much of this backsliding can be attributed to efforts by authoritarian actors to erode democracy and establish a new global order without checks against autocratic power grabs or human rights violations. This effort is characterized by authoritarian strategies to manipulate media and information spaces in order to undermine weak democracies in the region and to help like-minded illiberal leaders seize and consolidate power. Common narratives and strategies among authoritarian regimes in Latin America as well as global powers like Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have emerged as a driving force in today's information sphere.

This essay examines cross-regional collaboration among authoritarian states in information spaces across Latin America. It analyzes the policy and strategy of such actors, the narratives they deploy, and how cooperation in the information space is a component of deeper authoritarian collaboration and influence, to the detriment of democracy and human rights in the region.

Photo: A mural depicting the late Iranian general Qasem Soleimani (L) alongside late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez (R) in Caracas, Venezuela.

# AUTHORITARIAN ACTORS AND INFORMATION STRATEGIES IN LATIN AMERICA

Authoritarian leaders of Venezuela and Cuba have propagated antidemocratic narratives in Latin America for more than two decades, and during this time, their alignment with extra-regional authoritarian powers like Russia and the PRC has grown.<sup>1</sup> Authoritarian alignment is further observed in the policies and strategies of the governments of Russia, the PRC, and Venezuela.

The Kremlin has deployed vast sums of money developing media and information operations with global reach.<sup>2</sup> **Its strategy in the information environment mainly involves working to bolster its own image on the global stage; increasing the reach of Russian international media; gathering support for Russian foreign policy; and portraying Russia as a humanitarian partner to its allies.**<sup>3</sup> In Latin America and the Caribbean, Russian authorities are particularly focused on partnerships in Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In the deployment of pro-Kremlin narratives, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its embassies, and allied governments in the region collaborate closely. The Russian state-funded online outlets RT and Sputnik play a central role in the diffusion of pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>4</sup> Certain Latin American media outlets also reproduce narratives favorable to Russian interests, though probably due more to historical anti-U.S. sentiment than direct support for the Kremlin. Over the last year, political leaders in democratic countries in the region, such as Brazil and Mexico, have also joined the chorus of voices speaking in favor of the Kremlin's interests, lending democratic legitimacy to narratives that harm democracy.

Meanwhile, the information strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks increased influence for the PRC in the international sphere and a more amenable perception of its global expansion.<sup>5</sup> This approach is rooted in the Chinese foreign policy doctrine known as the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.” These principles include noninterventionism; mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs; equality and mutual benefits; and peaceful coexistence.<sup>6</sup> **These concepts are intended to convey a purely benign intent upon Beijing’s efforts at international influence, which in reality are often coercive in nature, particularly in the information space.**<sup>7</sup> To reach audiences in Latin America, the CCP instrumentalizes its Spanish-language media outlet, Xinhua Español, and China Global Television Network (CGTN), as well as diplomatic fora like the Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, or China–CELAC Forum. The latter institution is a pillar of Chinese efforts to influence elite opinion in the region. In countries where the CCP is focusing its influence operations, PRC diplomatic personnel frequently contribute to local news outlets and are active on social media, where they promote Chinese cultural content—sometimes alongside misleading narratives about the country’s human rights record and other topics.<sup>8</sup>

Amid a decline in support for democracy in Latin America, the potential of information campaigns to impact democratic practice is concerning.



Moreover, the CCP is helping authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments in Latin America consolidate power by providing technologies that facilitate surveillance and repression.<sup>9</sup> The Venezuelan Homeland ID system, developed by Chinese telecom giant ZTE, is a clear example of a technology for population registration and control.<sup>10</sup> PRC-based companies have also built video-surveillance systems across public spaces in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia. In addition, Beijing provides Havana with technology for blocking websites and surveilling internet users.<sup>11</sup> Working together, authoritarian regimes aim to control online spaces both through proactive information operations that promote authoritarian narratives as well as the surveillance and censorship of democratic voices.

The Venezuelan government, for its part, works to inject support for its primary foreign policy goals into the region's broader information space. These efforts include promoting multilateral organizations in which Venezuela has significant influence—such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)—as alternatives to the Organization of American States (OAS).<sup>12</sup> Like that of its counterparts in Moscow, **the Venezuelan regime's strategy relies heavily on social media (particularly X, formerly known as Twitter), international state media, pro-government digital outlets targeting international audiences, a vast network of allied fringe media, and, recently, the deployment on YouTube of fake newscasts featuring presenters created using generative artificial intelligence systems.**<sup>13,14</sup> Simultaneously, Venezuelan authorities are seeking to strengthen strategic alliances with the PRC, Russia, Brazil, and Iran to consolidate autocratic development at home and promote a multipolar world built on state sovereignty and noninterference principles.

### **Narratives Heralding an Authoritarian Multipolar World**

Since 2020, authoritarian information operations aiming to influence global politics are increasingly visible. An emerging narrative holds that there is common interest among Russia, the PRC, Africa, the Middle East, as well as Latin America, and that within the region, Latin American interests are more aligned with those of Russia and the PRC than with those of the United States or with democracy itself. **The Venezuelan government and Russian embassies in Latin America are prominent proponents of the “multipolar world” narrative, which is deployed in part to attack the credibility of the international, rules-based order and its enshrinement of democratic principles such as human rights and the rule of law.**<sup>15</sup>

According to data queried from social media data broker Meltwater, the topic “multipolar world” reached an estimated 96 million X users between March 5 and September 9, 2023. Audiences were primarily in Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Argentina, Colombia, the United States, Cuba, Ecuador, and Chile. The “multipolar world” idea was amplified via coordinated hashtags boosted by identified Venezuelan assets, including #VivaLaUnionDeLosPueblos (Long

Authoritarian regimes aim to control online spaces through information operations that promote authoritarian narratives, and the censorship of democratic voices.

## Online Content about the “Multipolar World”

An estimated

**96 million**

X users saw content related to the topic “multipolar world”

At least

**1.2 million**

Users engaged with content in Spanish referring to the rise of the “multipolar world.”

(March 5 and September 9, 2023)

Source: Meltwater, 2023

Live the People’s Union), #IranYVenezuelaUnidas (Iran and Venezuela United), #ChavezHechoMillones (Chavez Became Many), #NuevaGeometriaMultipolar (New Multipolar Geometry), and #ElSurRenace (the South is Reborn). These hashtags reached audiences not only in Venezuela but also in Cuba, Mexico, Spain, Nigeria, the United States, Brazil, Colombia, India, and Norway, among other countries. During the March 5–September 9, 2023 time period, at least 1.2 million users engaged with content in Spanish referring to the rise of the “multipolar world.” **The content that saw the most engagement, found via Meltwater queries, was posted by pro-Kremlin accounts on X and TikTok.**<sup>16</sup>

Alongside social media efforts, Russian officials have expressed the idea that a “global majority” of countries have already broken ties with the “collective West.”<sup>17</sup> Further propagation of the multipolar world concept, as discussed by pro-Kremlin and pro-CCP think tanks and influencers, makes explicit that, under the new order, the principle of noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs will guide international relations. In short, authoritarians are working to degrade a rules-based international order in favor of a world where the cost of amassing power through undemocratic means and violating people’s fundamental rights is negligible.

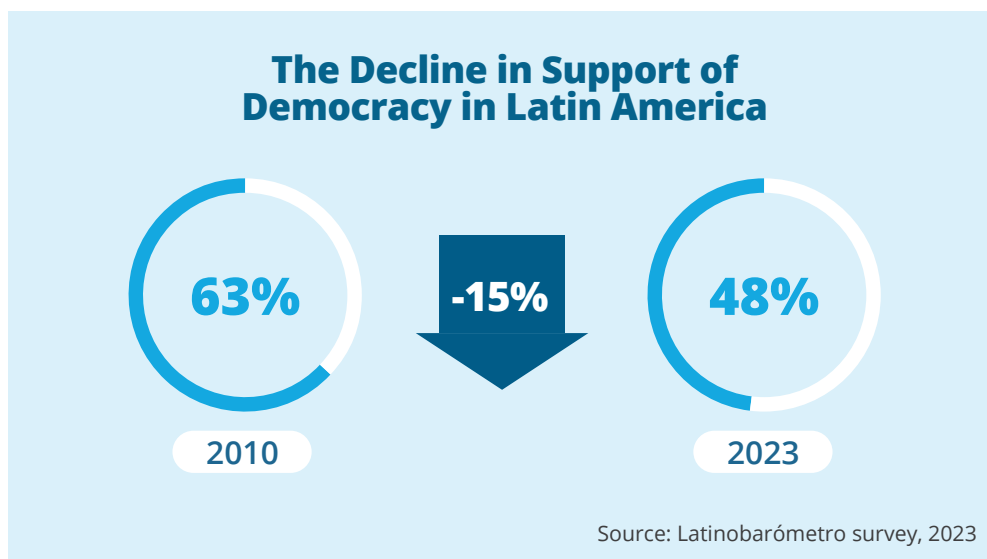
In July 2023, media affiliated with authoritarian actors instilled the “multipolar world” narrative in their coverage of that month’s European Union-CELAC summit.<sup>18</sup> Russian media portrayed the summit as a milestone in geopolitics, highlighting criticism by Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula Da Silva and Colombia’s Gustavo Petro that the full-scale Ukraine invasion dominated the agenda, rather than topics of greater common interest among Latin American countries and Europe. Xinhua Español’s coverage of the summit was less profuse, but pointed out a rebalancing in Europe-Latin America relations by which Europe sought deeper ties with the region to improve its own economy.<sup>19</sup> According to Xinhua, Argentina’s proposal to modify international financial structures was

among the most important developments arising from the summit. Likewise, PRC-friendly fringe websites emphasized that Europe's insistence on condemning Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, and continued EU sanctions against Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, put the summit at the brink of failure.

From the Venezuelan state media's perspective, the EU-CELAC summit failed to reach a consensus. According to state-mouthpiece TeleSur, the two most important issues of the summit were the call to lift sanctions, and Nicaragua's unrestricted support for Russia. Similarly, the Cuban newswire Prensa Latina focused its coverage on requests to lift sanctions on Cuba and Venezuela.<sup>20</sup> **For audiences exposed primarily to information from these authoritarian actors, the EU-CELAC summit effectively represented a step forward in a geopolitical alliance between Latin America and Russia.**<sup>21</sup> Latin American audiences exposed to authoritarian information operations may also be influenced to view the BRICS and the G77+China as platforms for building a new world order, characterized by the alliance between Russia, the PRC, and the Global South against U.S. imperialism. In reality, the forces behind these information operations are working toward a world safe for autocracy.

Amid a decline in support for democracy in Latin America, the potential of such information campaigns to impact democratic practice is concerning. According to Latinobarómetro's survey for 2023, only 48 percent of respondents in the region said they support democracy, a decrease of 15 percentage points **from 2010**. Respondents expressed the greatest support for democracy in Uruguay (70 percent), Argentina (62), Chile (58), Venezuela (57), and Costa Rica (56). Respondents expressed the least support for democracy in Paraguay (40 percent), Ecuador (37), Mexico (35), Honduras (32), and Guatemala (29).<sup>22</sup>

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# INFORMATION STRATEGIES UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY IN CHILE AND ECUADOR

Online information operations aiming to undermine democracy have been common in Latin America for more than a decade. Venezuela's "ChavezCandaga" initiative, for example, was established in 2010 to amplify then president Hugo Chávez's messages daily on X and other social media platforms.<sup>23</sup> **Over the last decade, regional authoritarian actors have intensified their efforts to undermine democratic institutions and consolidate their power by controlling the information space, with similar patterns and a similar playbook deployed across different countries.** Extra-regional actors are also active, attacking democratic leaders, backing authoritarian narratives, and attempting to influence elections.

This section highlights two cases that illustrate how foreign authoritarian actors are interfering in two democratic countries. First, we examine Venezuelan and Russian attempts to undermine the president of Chile, Gabriel Boric. Second, we look at Russian authorities' attempts to manipulate the Ecuadoran information space in favor of former president Rafael Correa, after the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

## **Authoritarian Narratives in Chile Targeting the Executive Branch**

Chilean president Gabriel Boric's condemnation of human rights violations in Nicaragua and Venezuela, and his description of the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine as an "unacceptable war of aggression" have prompted denunciations by undemocratic actors. Pro-Kremlin and pro-Venezuelan regime media, adversarial X troll networks, and influencers at both extremes of the political spectrum have hammered Boric as inexperienced, incompetent, and unfit to rule. Since December 2022, Russia's RT en Español has published a drumbeat of news items and op-eds antagonistic to Boric, including ones that amplify criticism originating in Venezuela and Brazil, and which make unfavorable comparisons with Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele.

**Content maligning the Chilean president has become more aggressive since the South American Presidential Summit in Brazil on May 30, 2023, where Boric drew attention to widespread human rights violations by the Maduro regime in Venezuela.** Since then, high-ranking officials of Venezuela's ruling Socialist Party have regularly attacked Boric on television, accusing the Chilean president of being an agent of U.S. imperialism and giving him the derisive moniker "Boboric." These attacks have been amplified by domestic actors in Chile on X, TikTok, and Telegram. After Boric asked his Latin American peers at July's European Union-CELAC summit to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, X networks doubled down on their attacks, amplifying false narratives claiming that he was as an agent of U.S. imperialism, an employee of the U.S. State Department, and funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

**Diosdado Cabello claims that Boric "is a fool" and acts like the "impertinent drunk" of the party**

Published: Jun 1, 2023 21:58 GMT

The Venezuelan politician said that the Chilean president "works for imperialism," that he has "bad intentions" and that he "betrayed" his people.

**Lula attributes his stance and "haste" on the conflict in Ukraine to Boric's youth**

Published: Jul 19, 2023 17:50 GMT

The Brazilian president considers that the EU-CELAC Summit was "extraordinary" and that the condition for starting peace talks is the cessation of the conflict.



**Boric's Chile: Chronicle of a Failure Foretold**

Oleg Yasinsky

Published: 19 Jan 2023 12:59 GMT

**Media report that Chile refused to sign the statement in support of Castillo on Boric's direct order**

**Null Vote and a Left That Ran Out of Narrative: Chile as a Scenario for the Advance of the Right**

Ociel Ali Lopez

**A parliamentary commission is created in Chile to investigate the scandal that muddies Boric**

*RT en Español Headlines about Gabriel Boric translated into English*

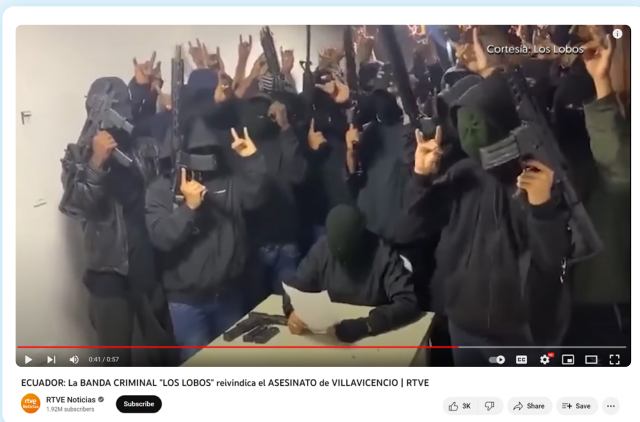
Intensifying such attacks by Venezuelan and Russian officials and their proxies may signal that authoritarian actors are testing the waters for more damaging campaigns against the Chilean president. Boric's government is currently facing significant social upheaval, including increased political tensions in the Araucanía Region; educators demanding redress of a "historical debt" dating to the times of the Pinochet dictatorship; and a tendentious multiyear effort to ratify a new constitution. **It is possible that further outbursts of civil unrest could open the door for authoritarian actors to use the information space to weaponize popular discontent and harm Chilean democracy.**

While Chile is among the most robust democracies in Latin America, **other countries where democracy is weaker can be more dramatically affected by malign information operations and other foreign interference.** That may be the case in Ecuador.

## Authoritarian Narratives Related to Ecuador’s 2023 Election

On August 9, 2023, a group of hit men assassinated popular Ecuadorian presidential candidate and former investigative journalist Fernando Villavicencio as he was leaving a campaign event.<sup>24</sup> **The killing opened new avenues for opportunistic Russian influence in Ecuador’s information space.**

Prior to his murder, Villavicencio, a prominent critic of former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa and his administration, had received death threats on account of his electoral platform, which promised to fight corruption and organized crime. While at the time of writing it remained unknown who planned the assassination, the hashtag #CorreaAsesino (#CorreaMurderer) emerged quickly afterward on the social media platform X, as users accused Correa of involvement in the killing. The Russian state media machine moved quickly to defend Correa, a close ally of Vladimir Putin and current host on RT en Español, including by elevating a video purporting to show the local gang Los Lobos claiming credit for the murder. The following day, the leader of Los Lobos published a video in which he appears unmasked and disputes the veracity of the earlier and denies any connection to Villavicencio’s death.



*The false video of Los Lobos on the left, with the subsequent unmasked Los Lobos gang on the right.*



**Between August 9 and 17, 2023, RT en Español published 76 pieces that spun news of the assassination of Fernando Villavicencio to the benefit of Rafael Correa,** including three stories in which Villavicencio’s murder was attributed to Los Lobos and which featured the debunked video of the fake Los Lobos. No correction was issued after the video was debunked. (Correa himself also later acknowledged that the Los Lobos video was “fake.”)<sup>25</sup>



### Who are Los Lobos, Ecuador's criminal group blamed for Villavicencio's murder?

Published: Aug 10, 2023 18:06 GMT

*RT en Español Headlines Peddling a Debunked Myth the Tying the Murder of Fernando Villavicencio to Los Lobos Criminal Gang*

### What Is Known About the Assassination of Ecuadorian Presidential Candidate Fernando Villavicencio

Published: 10 Aug 2023 15:39 GMT

Narratives on RT en Español included statements like:

- “Political assassinations are common in Ecuador and Latin America.” (While political assassinations have taken place in Latin America, such a high-profile assassination was unprecedented in Ecuador, and was shocking among citizens.)
- “Ecuador is on the verge of becoming a failed state due to the actions of its current president, Guillermo Lasso.” (This statement was a quote by Rafael Correa.)
- “The United States will take advantage of President Lasso’s request for FBI technical assistance in the assassination investigation to interfere in Ecuador’s internal affairs.”
- “The murder of Villavicencio was a set-up to smear former President Rafael Correa.”

The efforts to discredit Boric, and to defend Correa and portray Ecuador as ungovernable under the current administration, are complementary. **They promote the view that democracy is too messy to serve citizens well, and encourage the false promise that authoritarian rule will bring about stability.** The reality is that these authoritarian-backed narratives erode trust in the democratic institutions that allow citizens to hold would-be autocrats to account.

Authoritarian-backed narratives erode trust in the democratic institutions that allow citizens to hold would-be autocrats to account.

## INFORMATION STRATEGIES SUPPORTING AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IN CUBA, NICARAGUA, AND VENEZUELA

Narratives supporting Latin American autocrats have three primary aims. First, to portray the United States and, to a lesser extent, the EU as imperialistic powers attacking defenseless Latin American countries. Second, to garner public support in Latin American countries and the United States for lifting

sanctions against regimes responsible for systematic human rights violations. Third, and most important, **to communicate to authoritarian actors in the region that a consolidated network of allies will defend them as they work to erode democracy at home.**

Russian support for the authoritarian regimes of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba has increased markedly since 2019, evinced by RT en Español's regional news coverage. The Kremlin narrative maintains that these countries are being subjected to imperialist aggression by the United States in the form of economic sanctions. According to RT en Español, the EU would be on the verge of retracting its sanctions against Venezuela due to its current energy crisis if not for U.S. pressure.

Likewise, Chinese state outlet Xinhua Español published dozens of pieces in the last year denouncing the U.S. economic “war” against Venezuela and purported European interventionism disguised as a defense of human rights. Xinhua's pieces are often reproduced by smaller media outlets in Latin American countries lacking journalists with a focus on international affairs. In addition to Xinhua Español, a network of PRC-backed proxy websites publishes in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, targeting audiences in South America and the United States. These proxies also portray Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as progressive countries enduring U.S. attacks.

Meanwhile, more covert actors linked to the Venezuelan, Cuban, and Nicaraguan regimes spread self-serving narratives of heroic resistance against U.S. imperialism, at times coordinating their social media operations.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, fringe digital outlets and pseudo-NGOs associated with the Venezuelan regime amplify anti-imperialist tropes in support of Cuba and Venezuela. **Their campaigns targeting U.S. audiences are disguised as “people's solidarity with socialism,” a trademark of Cuban propaganda, and spread narratives characterizing international sanctions for severe human rights violations as acts of imperialism.** Consequently, some political actors in democratic countries have joined requests to lift sanctions on Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, citing a variety of reasons to justify these proposals, including humanitarian concerns, energy needs, and even the noninterference principle.

Coordinated information operations, including those orchestrated by authorities in concert with each another as well as independent operations that serve similar goals, contribute to a growing perception of a global authoritarian network. This perception not only empowers local authoritarians, who are aware that their regional and global allies will support them, but also may also signal to challengers that political dissent and competition will be powerfully and jointly repressed.

## CONCLUSION

Authoritarian actors are working toward a global order where they can govern indefinitely and without accountability. They proactively manipulate information spaces to this end, seeking to promote a system centered around state sovereignty and noninterference in an effort to overcome limits posed by democratic human rights norms. Prolonged inaction—or at least too little action—by democracies has allowed democratic erosion to deepen worldwide.

Across Latin America, Russia, the PRC, Venezuela, and Cuba act collectively to constrain the influence of the international human rights system by shielding one another from scrutiny, promoting concepts that encourage tolerance of authoritarian practices, and portraying investigations and criticism of human rights abuses as foreign interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. **One critical element of these efforts is the targeting of international organizations that undergird the rules-based international order in an effort to extend their influence over more territory and exploit natural and human resources without human rights restrictions.**

Despite backsliding in the region, this trend can be reversed. The world's democracies—particularly democracies in the Americas—must rally political will, allocate resources, and invigorate hemispheric collaboration as part of a long-term strategy to reverse authoritarian efforts and reinforce democracies. Central to this effort will be democratic governments working alongside allies in civil society, academia, and political parties to resist authoritarianism, drawing on their expertise to better identify and counter authoritarian information operations and secure the information space for democracy.

Authoritarian actors seek to promote a system centered around state sovereignty and noninterference to overcome limits posed by democratic norms.





# DEEPENING CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO AUTHORITARIAN INFORMATION MANIPULATION

// MARIVÍ MARÍN VÁZQUEZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER, PROBOX

## INTRODUCTION

As a Venezuelan, I have watched the descent of my country from a once-proud democracy into an authoritarian state under the control of Nicolás Maduro and his network of cronies. Since going into exile, I have had the opportunity to work alongside many other dissidents, democracy advocates, and human rights defenders who are researching and highlighting the abuses of authoritarian regimes in Latin America. One thing we all share is the hope that one day, the governments of our countries will again represent citizens and their dreams and aspirations, instead of those of just one man and his small circle of friends.

Yet, as I look at the region, I fear that authoritarians are ascendant. **With the help of international allies such as Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), authoritarian "values" and perspectives dominate our public discourse, leading to the decay of critical pillars of democracy such as government accountability, freedom of speech, equal rights for all, and free and fair elections.**

The organization I lead, ProBox, works to identify and expose the ways that the Maduro regime and its peers in Cuba, Nicaragua, and increasingly El Salvador are using the information space—and particularly X (formerly Twitter)—to

Photo: An image of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez adorns a traffic circle in Managua, Nicaragua.

consolidate control of their domestic political and economic systems. These actors go to great lengths to extend their influence in democracies across the region—which often take place in partnership with global authoritarian actors such as Russia and the PRC and use their vast resources to control the information environment in an effort to elevate favorable narratives and suppress critical voices.

While I believe our work, as well as that of our regional and global partners, is an important contribution, current efforts by civil society organizations, independent media, and academics will not be enough to counter authoritarianism. **We need new ways of working together to contest authoritarian narratives effectively, because the perceptions of the world that they foster among citizens are at the core of our democratic backsliding.**

This essay examines the state of responses to authoritarian information operations across Latin America to date, the origins and dynamics of certain narratives, and concludes with a few thoughts about how civil society across the region can more effectively highlight and counter illiberal influence in our information spaces and defend our democracies.

## **AUTHORITARIAN EFFORTS TO MANIPULATE LATIN AMERICAN INFORMATION SPACES**

Authoritarian regimes in Latin America such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua consistently deploy information operations to harm their opponents and bolster their own positions domestically and across Latin America. With the support of the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), regional authoritarian governments use state resources to amplify their propaganda on social media platforms. The Venezuelan regime is particularly adept at this strategy, both in its domestic propaganda and in its information operations around the region.

**These tactics are advanced by Russian media advisors who provide technical assistance to the Maduro regime to develop its communication strategy.<sup>1</sup>**

This effort is part of a global support network through which Russia provides communications and propaganda-related support in places ranging from Belarus to Myanmar.

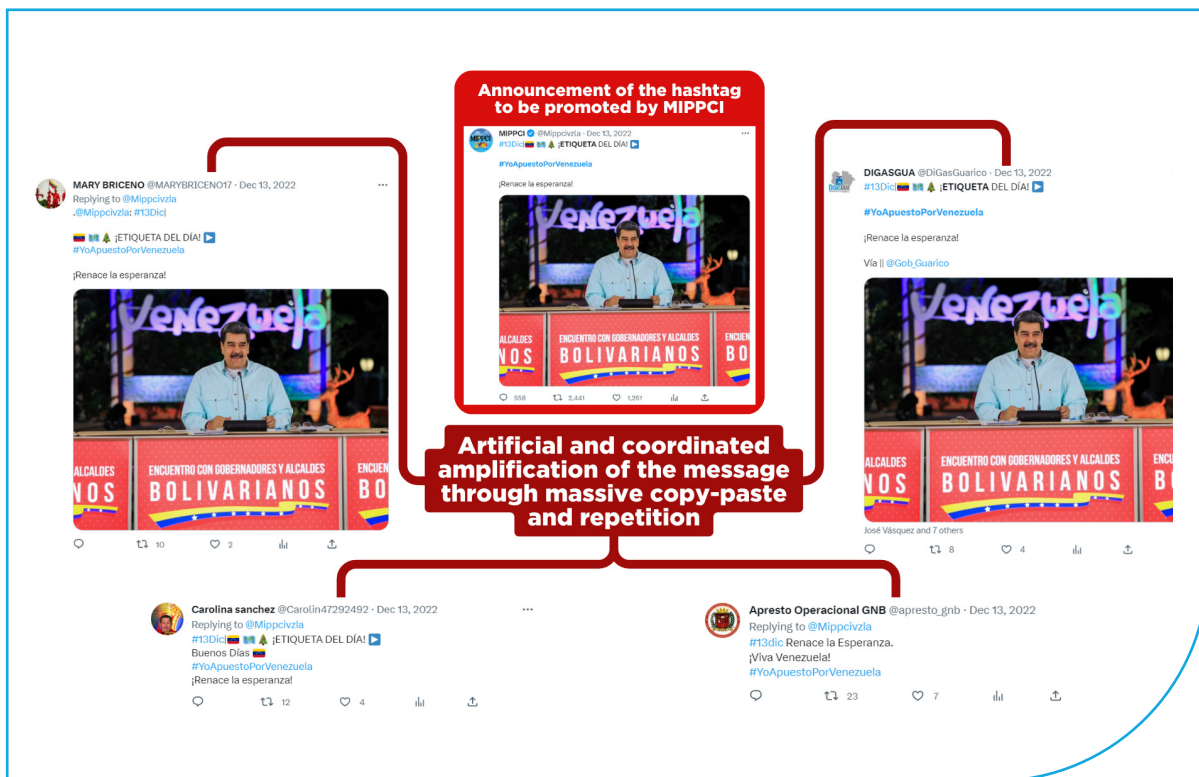
The Venezuelan state also uses Homeland ID, a digital identification and social control mechanism, which was developed by Chinese telecommunications company<sup>2</sup> and is used to track and engage Venezuelans at home and abroad. This system gives citizens economic bonuses and access to other benefits provided by the state, including direct payments, for echoing state narratives on social media. As in many Latin American countries, decentralized digital spaces such as WhatsApp and X have become the primary source of information for Venezuelans as a consequence of media censorship and the collapse of the journalistic business model, a trend which has been particularly acute in

With the support of Russia and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), authoritarian governments use state resources to amplify their propaganda on social media platforms.

countries facing political crises. The Homeland ID system and its incentives help the Maduro regime—often working in concert with its counterparts in Cuba and Nicaragua—to amplify its information operations, coordinate illiberal narratives across social media platforms, and position favorable topics and perspectives across Spanish-language networks on social media platforms.<sup>3</sup>

In both Venezuela’s domestic and regional efforts, this strategy works as follows:

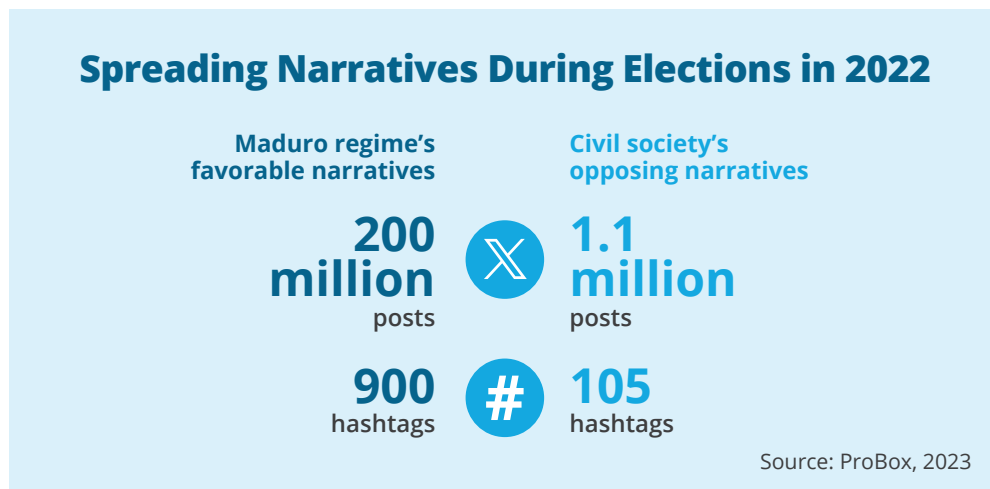
1. The Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MIPPCI), the leading propaganda organ for the Maduro regime, promotes a “hashtag of the day” that is spread by coordinated user accounts called “*Tuiteros de la Patria*” (Tweeters of the Homeland) or “Twitter troops.”
2. This hashtag is repeated by these “Twitter troops,” who work to position and maintain at least one narrative that is favorable to Maduro’s regime or partner regimes, or that is harmful to the democratic opposition, among the country’s top trends every day.<sup>4</sup>
3. The “Twitter troops” receive weekly rewards for amplifying these narratives in the form of payments made through the Homeland ID system.



*Artificial amplification by Tuiteros de la Patria of key regime-aligned messages.*

The Maduro regime uses this system to spread favorable narratives during elections<sup>5</sup> and to defame human rights defenders,<sup>6</sup> among other purposes, and has deployed it in service of narratives that benefit regional allies. For example, during the Ecuadorian presidential election in 2021, the Venezuelan government promoted trending topics on X (Twitter at that time) that favored Andrés Arauz, a Maduro ally, and discredited the eventual winner, Guillermo Lasso.<sup>7</sup>

According to ProBox research, this well-oiled digital machinery produced almost 200 million tweets featuring nearly 900 hashtags in 2022, in contrast to only 1.1 million posts generated by civil society to oppose the regime narrative, which were spread across 105 hashtags during the same period. The Maduro regime's practices are designed with the aim of manipulating the information space and imposing its preferred narratives while drowning out dissenting voices.



## ASSESSING REGIONAL EFFORTS TO COUNTER AUTHORITARIAN INFORMATION MANIPULATION

As awareness of authoritarian state actors' use of online manipulation tactics and their impact on democracy in Latin America has increased in recent years, efforts to counter them and strengthen the integrity of the information space have also expanded. **Fact checking, media literacy programming, and independent journalism are among the primary responses.**

### Fact Checking

The high rate of information manipulation that accompanied the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the establishment of many new governmental, civil society, and other initiatives to battle manipulative content online. **Fact checking has not only been one of the most effective approaches to building awareness of good medical information—the tactic has also proven to be a great tool for the endless task of debunking false information in other realms, including around elections, crisis episodes, and a wide variety of local contexts.**



There are fact-checking organizations in nearly all Latin American countries, most of which are part of the LatamChequea alliance, led by Chequeado in Argentina and launched in 2014, which also includes partner organizations in the United States, Portugal, and Spain.

**There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that fact checking improves citizens' perceptions of reality and understanding of key issues, and is an effective response to the spread of rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation in the public sphere.**<sup>8</sup> It is an important part of the cocktail mix of responses necessary to combat authoritarian influence in the information space.

Still, fact checkers also face challenges. For instance, fact checking is inherently reactive; it requires a sophisticated understanding of the narratives that malign actors are attempting to popularize in public conversation and can require painstaking efforts to research, interview, and verify information, while the original misrepresentation could require only moments to create and disseminate across channels, platforms, and to reach broader audiences through traditional media. There are efforts to move away from reactive “debunking” and toward proactive “pre-bunking,” but such endeavors require significant resources and still may not be enough to stop the dissemination of a harmful narrative once it has spread. Furthermore, **fact checking alone may not be enough when information operations do not provide false information, but instead seek to prioritize problems that may advantage authoritarian responses from governments** such as external aggression, or are complemented by attempts by malicious actors to strike the stability and credibility of democratic governments, institutions, and organizations.

## Media Literacy

Media literacy programs help empower people to analyze the information in front of them and make decisions about whether it is trustworthy, and there are a number of such initiatives in Latin America. UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) plan,<sup>9</sup> which assists UN Member States in formulating national policies and strategies, provides guidelines for stakeholders working to embed media literacy in development programs. Other examples of initiatives to strengthen media literacy in Latin America include the work of organizations like Medianalisis,<sup>10</sup> a Venezuelan non-profit; SocialTic,<sup>11</sup> a Mexican nonprofit dedicated to research, training, support, and promotion of digital technology and information for social purposes; and Transparencia Venezuela, which created a manual that aims to help users develop good online research habits.<sup>12</sup>

**Media literacy programs can have a powerful impact on the integrity of the information space as part of a broader range of responses, but they can take time to have impact, especially where authoritarian information operations are already active.** They are also challenging to scale, and may not include components on recognizing and countering the authoritarian influence in the information environment.

## Independent Journalism

Independent journalism is a critical component to countering authoritarian influence. While much of the journalism sector has been decimated by the collapse of traditional business models, Latin America has a number of independent digital media outlets doing important work to highlight growing authoritarian influence in the region, such as *el Faro*<sup>13</sup> based in El Salvador, as well as Venezuela's RunRunes<sup>14</sup> and ArmandoInfo.<sup>15</sup> **Independent journalism provides a critical conduit for trusted voices to inform the public about corruption, public policy, current events, and other issues critical to their lives.** It is a powerful tool for accountability, highlighting the hypocritical or harmful actions of corrupt and illiberal leaders, and can drive public opposition to poor stewards of public trust.

As with other approaches, independent journalism is a critical component of a larger set of methods, yet as a practice, it confronts certain challenges which may undermine its impact. Most notable among these challenges is that **independent journalists operate openly, and are easy targets for the regimes they seek to hold accountable, who may subject them to legal harassment or extralegal retribution, or even violence.** At the same time, well-researched investigations take time and are costly, a challenge exacerbated by the failure of traditional ad-based models of revenue in the journalism sector.

## A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE TO COUNTERING AUTHORITARIAN INFORMATION MANIPULATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Although the efforts enumerated above are invaluable, no single approach will be enough to counter authoritarian information operations in all of their permutations. Critical to a comprehensive response is the right combination of approaches, which include fact checking, media literacy, and independent journalism, but also the approaches described below.

### Multidisciplinary Coalition-Building

As challenges to democracy within the information space have grown and evolved, so have collaborative efforts among civil society to understand and counteract them. The right combination of skill sets involved can serve as a powerful counterweight to malign information operations. It may include **fact checkers to debunk outright lies and provide contextual information; researchers who highlight narrative tropes over time and can attribute messaging to particular actors; independent media and journalists who understand how to explain complex topics to the public; pollsters who**

The right combination of skill sets involved can serve as a powerful counterweight to malign information operations.

**understand public opinion and can determine which malign narratives are having impact; and strategic communications experts who know how to reach audiences with critical information,** among others.

El Filtro,<sup>16</sup> a new group of five Salvadoran media outlets, represents one such multidisciplinary effort. Through investigative work, data analysis, and illustrative storytelling, they explain how the government of Nayib Bukele employs a sophisticated network of online trolls and loyal supporters to promote the president's hard-line anti-gang policies, and to smear journalists and political opponents.<sup>17</sup> In Venezuela, C-Infoma<sup>18</sup> is a coalition of five local organizations working together to identify, expose, and denounce manipulative information campaigns in the country—including “deepfake” videos generated by artificial intelligence in which false news anchors extolled Maduro's purported resolution of economic, migration, and other crises.<sup>19</sup>

Broader regional alliances exist as well. The Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP), a collaborative alliance of investigative journalists from sixteen Spanish-speaking countries, works to investigate and reveal the tactics of what they've deemed “digital mercenaries.”<sup>20</sup> They also work to identify both regional and global actors who damage the digital information space on a large scale via targeted trolling, information manipulation, and related campaigns.

## **Data-Driven Attribution of Authoritarian Information Operations**

Researchers and civil society groups working in the Latin American information space are increasingly studying social media data to determine the origin and possible repercussions of particular online narratives. This approach is especially important in the context of authoritarian information operations, wherein understanding the motives of the aggressor helps guide the choice of response. **A purely domestic, false narrative, for example, may necessitate a different response than one advanced by global authoritarian powers like Russia or the PRC,** as exposing a seemingly domestic narrative as one that is being promoted by a foreign actor can be a powerful counter to malign global influence in the eyes of the public.

Many of the tools that allow researchers to attribute information operations to a particular actor depend on accessible application programming interfaces (APIs), which are managed by the platforms themselves. Although platforms such as YouTube have provided the research community with some access, the overall level of access has decreased markedly in recent months, creating new hurdles to effective analysis of the information environment and information operations.<sup>21</sup> The closure of X's open API in February 2023, the slow closure of Meta's Crowdtangle tool, and the tight controls that TikTok places on its API headline the increasing challenge of accessing social media data to analyze trends in the information space and their impact on societies.

Exposing a seemingly domestic narrative as one that is being promoted by a foreign power can be a powerful counter to malign global influence in the eyes of the public.

Examples of attribution efforts include the work of Interpreta,<sup>22</sup> a Chilean organization that analyzes narratives surrounding issues like migration, women's rights, the country's constitutional reform process, and their audiences; Linterna Verde,<sup>23</sup> a Colombian non-profit investigating how public opinion is built on social networks, to draw attention to the risks that civil society organizations face in digital spaces; and Cazadores de Fake News,<sup>24</sup> a Venezuelan organization that analyzes activity on social media and messaging platforms and works to attribute and combat information operations. My organization, ProBox,<sup>25</sup> analyzes large volumes of data to determine whether a particular narrative is driven by humans or by bot networks associated with Latin American regimes.

This work not only contributes to the fight against local authoritarian efforts in the information space, but also provides important ecosystem-level analysis of authoritarian information operations in regional information spaces.

## OSINT Training

Manipulation of the information environment has driven the creation of new ecosystems of researchers working with empirical, publicly-sourced data. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) involves the compilation and analysis of public data to build awareness of newsworthy events, locations, and individuals. OSINT may include publicly available data analysis, satellite imagery, public records, and other kinds of accessible information. **Using OSINT methods, researchers can debunk bogus narratives with forensic analysis that anyone can scrutinize—or investigate further on their own.**

The DRFLab at the Atlantic Council tracks authoritarian information operations and autocratic attempts to subvert democracy, while also teaching citizens skills to identify and expose attempts to manipulate the information space.<sup>26</sup> Its [Digital Sherlock program](#) has trained more than 2,300 people—many of them in Latin America—on OSINT techniques, data analysis, fact-checking, source verification, narrative analysis, social media monitoring, and related topics.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Authoritarian information operations pose a serious and ongoing threat for the democratic world. **They degrade the information space and undermine concepts of truth and shared reality that underpin democratic governance in an effort to strengthen authoritarian regimes at home and abroad.**

Authoritarians do not act alone but are sharing tools, strategies, and knowledge with each other, contributing to increasingly sophisticated methods of spreading harmful narratives and quashing dissent. In Latin America, Russian and CCP authorities are providing regional authoritarian regimes with tools and knowledge to manipulate the information space, or doing so themselves in order to smear dissidents, rights defenders, and political challengers while bolstering ideologically-aligned actors.

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Despite these efforts, there are signs that awareness of the problem and strategies to respond are growing in number and sophistication. Researchers are innovating and developing new tools and tactics to counter malign information operations. Activists, journalists, and civil society groups are collaborating to expose malign information campaigns using OSINT tools and other cutting-edge data approaches, as well as tapping talented storytellers and graphic artists to present information in a way that engages citizens. They are monitoring emergent malign narratives, fact checking them, and developing programs that empower citizens to better recognize quality information from lies disseminated by troll networks, political cronies, or authoritarian leaders themselves.

I believe—not only based on my own work and experience, but on the will and determination I've seen in the eyes of activists all over the region—that the fight for democracy in Latin America is alive and well. The struggle will be long and difficult, though, and resources are limited. There is a pressing need for democratic governments in the region to help by resourcing research networks that have expertise in fighting authoritarian information operations and by convening civil society experts, activists, journalists, academics, tech professionals, and policymakers to learn from each other.

On the ground, it is time for a new generation of advocates—our generation—to honor our predecessors by finding new ways of fighting and winning old battles. My hope is that future generations will have the opportunity to thrive because of the work of civil society to stop the rise of authoritarianism in Latin America and to restore confidence in our democracies.

## ENDNOTES

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### Cross-Regional Authoritarian Collaboration in Latin American Information Spaces

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## Deepening Civil Society's Response to Authoritarian Information Manipulation

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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Iria Puyosa** is a senior researcher at the DFRLab Democracy + Tech Initiative. Puyosa's expertise extends to social media's impact on political conflicts and the study of global information operations undermining democracy. She also works on critical cyberspace issues, including cyber sovereignty risks and preventing internet fragmentation, data protection, and state surveillance. She has a PhD from the University of Michigan, a graduate degree from the Andrés Bello Catholic University, and a bachelor's degree from the Central University of Venezuela. Follow on X: [@NSC](#).

**Mariví Marín Vázquez** is the founder and executive director of ProBox, a non-profit organization dedicated to studying political and social trends on Twitter (now X) in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Vázquez is also a political scientist affiliated with the Universidad Central de Venezuela, a "digital sherlock" associated with the DFRLab, and an active member of the Forum 2000 community. Follow her on X: [@marivimarinv](#).

### ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Adam Fivenson** is the senior program officer for information space integrity at the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies, where he conducts research on the integrity of the information space and countering authoritarian information activities. Prior to joining the Forum, Adam advised political figures, governments, and international non-profits on communication, technology, and data strategy, and led ethnographic research missions on the impact of new technologies on societies across four continents. Follow him on X: [@afivenson](#).

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1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20004  
(202) 378-9700



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