From Moscow to Caracas

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Introduction

International relations are often perceived in an idyllic manner through the prism of their encyclopaedic definition as relations between nations or national groups encompassing issues of identity, minority rights, integration, ethnic conflicts, and states' nationality policies. Negative phenomena are typically described using terms such as conflict, open armed confrontation, military aggression, or war. In Europe, particularly since the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, we have grown accustomed to a positive image of alliance-building, especially regarding NATO's 1999 enlargement to include the first countries of the former Eastern Bloc, followed by those

same states. Everything appeared forward-looking and positive: alliances built upon shared values, equality, and cooperation.

However, alliances also exist that are founded on opposite principles — violence, wrongdoing, corruption, and even the propagation of war. The infamous "Axis of Evil" of the Second World War era, as well as the USSR and its satellite states (a common front of communist countries), were examples of such configurations. Russia, as the successor to the criminal Soviet communist regime, has for years continued to cultivate alliances of this nature — albeit less regionally and increasingly on a global scale.

Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, argues that the nation is an "imagined community", and that national relations stem from the ways in which members of national communities perceive themselves and others within this imagined framework (Anderson,1983 p.6-7).One of the key elements in image-building is media presence. In this regard, national branding, propaganda, and both soft and sharp power (particularly in the context of information warfare and digital diplomacy) constitute components of media communication strategies that fall within broader international relations concepts.Toxic populism emerging in social media, fake news, and hate speech are becoming an inseparable part of hybrid warfare. This was symbolically yet vividly illustrated by Azerbaijani cartoonist Gunduz Aghayev, when Azerbaijan itself was struggling with Russian hybrid warfare in Karabakh.

Figure 1: A symbolic depiction of social media as elements of warfare. Gunduz Aghayev. Source: https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/heroes-of-the-virtual-world-by-gunduz-aghayev/

Propaganda and the Media as Instruments of "Soft Power" and "Sharp Power"

Media and propaganda constitute significant instruments of influence within the international system. From constructivist and liberal perspectives, information shapes perceptions of threats, national identity, and the legitimacy of state action.

The concept of "soft power", developed by Joseph Nye, assumes that a state can achieve its objectives through cultural and narrative attractiveness rather than solely through military coercion (Nye, 1990). In the context of hybrid warfare, however, propaganda often transforms into "sharp power" — the deliberate manipulation of information aimed at destabilising an opponent.

The media thus becomes a battlefield for:

Such narratives are also frequently encountered in countries that are fundamentally democratic, most often within extreme right-wing and nationalist circles. Toxic populism in right-wing media, with particular emphasis on social media platforms, where creating broadcasting channels is far easier and cheaper, yields tangible results for propagandists and

their supporters, as seen in the case of Hungary and the anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian narrative of the Orbán government (in this case relying on traditional information resources such as TV, radio, or posters), Slovakia, or the far right in Poland (UE zaostrza politykę walki z dezinformacją, 2025**)** and France, where the use of social media as a tool for disinformation is among the highest in the EU.

Russia's Disinformation Strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean

Since 2014, Russian state media outlets, including Sputnik and RT, have systematically expanded their presence in Latin America, focusing particularly on Spanish-language news content. These activities aim to undermine the position of the United States, whitewash Russia's role in international affairs — particularly in the context of its war against Ukraine — and promote the Russian political model as an alternative to liberal democracy.

A 2023 report entitled *"Russian Influence Campaigns in Latin America"*, supported by the United States Institute of Peace, indicates that Russia effectively employs disinformation, economic pressure, and both overt and covert political activities in the region (Farah &, Ortiz,2023). According to analyses by the Atlantic Council (Farah, & Ortiz, 2023), Russia's strategy also includes tailored communication adapted to the specific characteristics of individual states, as well as the active involvement of ambassadors in promoting Kremlin narratives within domestic media environments.

The Response of the United States and the European Union to Russian Influence Campaigns

In response to the activities of Russian state media, the United States imposed new sanctions in September 2024, recognising these entities not merely as sources of disinformation but also as elements of the intelligence apparatus of the Russian Federation. These measures form part of broader efforts to limit the impact of Russian propaganda in Latin America and the Caribbean NSD/FARA Registration Unit, 2024).

The European Parliament, in its 2020 resolution concerning foreign disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, called for countering aggressive propaganda activities by Russia and China. In a subsequent resolution of 28 February 2024, the Parliament emphasised the need to strengthen the capacities of EU delegations in the field of public diplomacy and strategic communication in order to combat disinformation more effectively (European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, 2022).

Distribution of Russian Content within the Venezuelan Media System

More than 90 cable television operators in Venezuela, including Inter — the operator with the widest reach — retransmit RT programming, thereby ensuring significant visibility for Russian narratives within the national information space. The channel was also offered by Simple TV (including on channel 709) until March 2022, indicating the institutional entrenchment of Russian content within the country's media infrastructure (Amaya, 2022).

Narrative Symbiosis between Russian and Venezuelan Media

The state broadcaster Venezolana de Televisión regularly retransmits Russian materials during its main news bulletins, granting them fixed broadcasting slots and integrating their narratives into its own information programmes. The joint project launched in 2015 by Telesur and RT, entitled *"Venezuela y Rusia en la mira"*, represents an example of coordinated media cooperation aimed at promoting an alternative interpretation of international events to that presented by Western media outlets (RT, 2015).

Symbiosis, Accomplices in Conspiracy Theories, and "Useful Idiots"Cooperation between totalitarian and authoritarian states in exchanging and supporting propaganda media technologies and strategies is hardly surprising. What may be more striking, however, are the useful idiots (the term is commonly attributed to Vladimir Lenin) from so-called first world countries. One example is cited by Anne Applebaum in her book *Autocracy, Inc. (2024)*, where the spread of fake news about alleged biological laboratories in Ukraine, purportedly sponsored by Kyiv—which was used as part of the justification for Russia's barbaric aggression against a sovereign country—illustrates this phenomenon. The fake news, originally produced by Russia, was disseminated by China, Venezuela, and Iran (Russia's allied countries). However, it also gained significant traction in the United States, where, according to Applebaum, followers of the QAnon movement amplified it, achieving media reach and a substantial following. According to the author, the campaign aimed not only to discourage support for Ukraine but also to weaken and discredit the Joe Biden administration within the American political landscape (Applebaum, 2024, p. 86-87).

Conclusions

In the context of the concept of soft power and its evolution into sharp power, media and propaganda function as key instruments in information warfare, enabling both authoritarian states and political actors within democratic systems to shape narratives, polarise societies, and influence public opinion. This is exemplified by the actions of totalitarian states, but it is also observed in democratic or ostensibly democratic countries, such as Hungary (Applebaum, 2024, p. 77).

Figure 2: Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik in Venezuelan media. Amaya, V. (2022). *Russia and Venezuela. Allies in disinformation.* Caracas, Venezuela.

Since 2014, Russian state media outlets, such as Sputnik and RT, have systematically expanded their presence in Latin America through Spanish-language content, implementing an information influence strategy that encompasses disinformation, economic pressure, and tailored political messaging (Farah, & Ortiz, 2023). The aim is to weaken the position of the United States and promote Russia's geopolitical narratives, as confirmed by analyses from the United States Institute of Peace and the Atlantic Council.

In response to the increasing activity of Russian information operations, both the United States and the European Parliament, as well as NATO, are implementing coordinated measures encompassing sanctions, the development of strategic communication, and the strengthening of societal resilience, recognising disinformation as an element of hybrid activities used by Russia to influence public opinion and destabilise the international order. However, it can be argued that current efforts to counter disinformation are insufficient, with a lack of widespread public awareness, resilience building, and guidance on how to distinguish falsified information from genuine content and verify it, particularly in an era of rapid AI technological development.

The case of Venezuela demonstrates that media cooperation between authoritarian states can take the form of a durable informational symbiosis, in which Russian narratives—disseminated via RT and local broadcasters—are institutionally integrated into the national media system, reinforcing an alternative message to that of the West.

At the same time, as Anne Applebaum (Applebaum, 2024) notes, the effectiveness of these actions stems from the existence of a transnational disinformation ecosystem, in which narratives created by Russia are amplified both by parts of the population in allied states ("useful idiots") and by social actors in democratic countries (e.g., communities associated with QAnon), enabling them to achieve tangible political influence.

Actions in the field of disinformation and propaganda media, based on the examples mentioned above, can be described in two ways. Russia, which can boldly be described as the mother of propaganda, has been operating in a specialised manner for years. Its actions can be described as twofold: internal propaganda, which has historical foundations and background, influencing the minds of its citizens — which, in light of recent events, such as the blocking of even the Telegram (Ishubul'din, 2026) and messengers and the planned disconnection from global internet access (*«Isklyuchayet polnuyu izolyatsiyu»: uchonyy — o veroyatnošti otklyucheniya Rossii ot interneta i perŠpektivakh šputnikovoy svyazi Ob etom soobshchayet,* 2026), will be an easy task in the style of Cold War propaganda using only traditional communication methods (radio, press, TV); and an extensive network of propaganda media based on psychological-informational hybrid warfare in

countries selected by Russia, mainly through social media, spreading fake news and disinformation in many languages, and using the aforementioned useful idiots as its tools. Venezuela relied only on domestic messaging, with technological support from its Russian ally; this propaganda aimed solely to maintain the authoritarian power of Nicolás Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez.

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