
The West Against the Rest? Democracy Versus Autocracy Promotion in Venezuela

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Venezuela provides a strong test case for the weakening of democracy and the strengthening of autocracy promotion. External actors are a key part of the domestic political game: the European Union and the United States (EUUS) promote ‘democracy by coercion’ and recognised Juan Guaidó as president, whereas China, Cuba and Russia (CCR) bolster the regime of Nicolás Maduro. A comparative foreign policy analysis argues that, firstly, EUUS sanctions have resulted in strengthening CCR’s autocratic leverage and linkage; and secondly, the division ‘between the West and the Rest’ has posed an additional obstacle for a transition to democracy and national reconstruction.

Keywords: autocracy promotion, democracy promotion, external actors, foreign policy, transition, Venezuela.

Beyond the dynamics of the domestic power game, the Venezuelan contention has become an international competition between democracy and autocracy promotion. The West, led by the European Union and the United States (EUUS), represents the former option, whereas China, Cuba and Russia (CCR) characterise the latter. Their involvement in Venezuela is evidence of the country’s strategic importance for all five actors, due to its large oil reserves, its regional influence and impact through ALBA, close ties to other authoritarian regimes (Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran and Turkey) and destabilisation by migration flows, and as a secondary stage for the power conflict between ‘the West and the Rest’ (Ferguson, 2012). Both groups support inverse transition processes. EUUS, as the most powerful Western actors, seek to force the Maduro regime to engage in a democratic transition through coercion and the support of the opposition, while CCR soft-balance these efforts and promote electoral authoritarianism to guarantee the regime’s survival (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021) in their own interest. For the moment, the regime seems to be ‘winning’: interim president Juan Guaidó has not been able to divide the regime and initiate a democratic transition, whereas Maduro has consolidated his power despite a dramatic humanitarian and economic crisis. The power balance between the two blocs, and particularly the interplay between the US and Russia, creates a significant obstacle to a peaceful resolution, which is a goal on which all actors agree, but via completely different instruments, in line with their opposed interests to stabilise Maduro (CCR), or change the regime (EUUS).

Since January 2019, Venezuela’s ‘two presidents’ have fought for power: Maduro, who ‘won’ fraudulent elections in December 2020 and May 2018 and holds power thanks to a

co-government with the armed forces and the support of CCR; and Guaidó, who justifies his proclamation as interim president based on article 233 of the Constitution that allows him to replace the president in case of his death, his resignation or replacement by the Supreme Court of Justice. Guaidó has also gained international recognition by nearly 60 countries. The result of twenty years of political polarisation between opposition and government has led to economic disaster, and transformed the oil-rich country into a weak state, according to the Fund for Peace Index 2020 (The Fund for Peace, 2020), which ranked Venezuela as the 28th most 'fragile country' in the world.

Hoffmann (2018: 117) has highlighted that 'the international cooperation of authoritarian regimes explains the resilience of non-democracies', among others Venezuela. In this case, the policies of autocracy and democracy promoters are not only motivated by material economic self-interests or 'linkages' defined as ties and cross-border flows, but also by ideas, influence or 'leverage', understood as the government's vulnerability to external democratising pressure (Levitsky and Way, 2006: 379). In this article, the original concept of linkage and leverage will be extended to autocracy promotion as the inverse formula of 'vulnerability to external' autocratisation pressure.

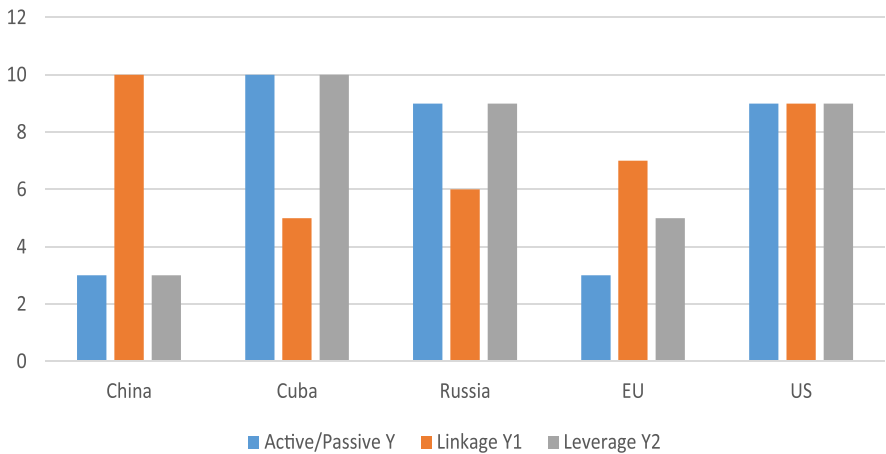
From a comparative foreign policy (CFP) approach, the article assumes that 'ideational, and not just material conditions, do shape foreign policies' (Lantis and Beasley, 2017: 6). This single case study on the interaction between democracy versus autocracy promotion in Venezuela seeks to explore the interplay between linkage, or the material dimension of autocracy and democracy promotion (Tables 1 and 2), and leverage, or its ideational dimension of 'vulnerability and pressure' between CCR and 'the West', when promoting inverse political goals in Venezuela.

Based on Levitsky and Way's indicators (2006: 379), in this article linkage refers to cross-border flows and ties such as trade exchange, investment/loans, political and diplomatic relations, and excludes, in this case, communication and the social or people's dimension due to the lack of data on behalf of CCR. A comparative, qualitative analysis of official documents and discourses (2013–2020) and secondary sources of EUUS and CCR policies covers the 'leverage'. Official documents refer to declarations, official visits, strategies, and measures announced on the websites of foreign ministries, other ministries (for example, the US Treasury) and parliaments; and in the case of the EU: the European External Action Service, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council. These (few) discourses, available in English or Spanish, were selected by searching for 'Venezuela' at the various websites, and, in the Cuban case, by choosing political statements on the regime. The qualitative comparative analysis of EUUS sources is based on an updated discourse selection of Ayuso and Gratius (2020). 'Linkage' covers material cross-border ties or political, social and economic relations.

The article focuses on governmental support, and does not include civil societies, NGO efforts or regional organisations' engagement in that field. The selection of these five actors is justified by their high linkage and leverage (Tables 3, 4 and Figure 1), compared to other countries like Iran or Turkey with low linkage in terms of trade and investment, which, according to Levitsky and Way (2006), reduce their influence on foreign political regimes. Within the two blocs, depending on the 'intentionality' or 'deliberate action' (Yakouchyk, 2016: 6), each of the external actors is classified as 'active' or 'passive' autocracy and democracy promoter (Figure 1).

The article explores two interactions between autocracy and democracy promotion: firstly, the hypothesis that EUUS, inadvertently, by imposing sanctions transferred linkage and leverage to CCR. Consequently, their democracy promotion efforts by

Figure 1. Active/Passive, Linkage/Leverage.



Source: author's own elaboration.

coercion contributed to regime stabilisation since the US and the EU unintentionally forced the regime to strengthen political and economic interdependences with CCR. Secondly, because of their one-sided position in the conflict, all five actors are part of the 'domestic political game', and none can assume a mediation role that requires neutrality. The division 'between the West and the Rest' (Ferguson, 2012), or 'the Rest against the West', has contributed to the political conflict in Venezuela and poses an additional obstacle for a negotiated transition to democracy and national reconstruction.

These two hypotheses are addressed by conducting a qualitative comparative foreign policy analysis of democracy (EUUS), and autocracy promotion (CCR), divided into four sections. Firstly, this article provides an overview on the democracy and autocracy promotion debate as opposing foreign-policy goals; secondly, an analysis of EU and US policies is undertaken; thirdly, the policies of autocracy promotion by CCR is analysed; and the fourth section compares linkage and leverage of the five external actors, including different interpretations on four concepts (democratic peace, sovereignty, sanctions, and diplomatic recognition) that help to explain autocratic versus democratic 'leverage'. The conclusion systematises the main arguments and goes back to the hypothesis.

Democracy Versus Autocracy Promotion

Venezuela provides a clear case of simultaneous democracy and autocracy promotion by strong and influential external actors. Under Maduro's presidency, these actors have contributed to a domestic-driven 'reverse transition' from democracy to authoritarianism (Diamond, 2015; Kneuer, 2021); a process that has been reinforced since 2015, when the opposition won the majority of seats in the National Assembly. Legislative elections are due to be held on 6 December 2020, without the majority of opposition parties that decided to boycott them. From January 2019 on, particularly the US and

Russia increased their engagement in the conflict, and Venezuela became an important test case for democracy and autocracy promotion.

Both fields of study, democracy and autocracy promotion, developed independently, but little has been said about their interdependence and the impact on a targeted country (Vanderhill, 2013: 5). An example for their interdependence offers the concept of Western leverage and linkage to democratise third countries (Levitsky and Way, 2006) that was later on used for a study on 'authoritarian linkages of the Rest' by Tansey, Köhler and Schmotz (2017).

Most Western states perceived democracy promotion as a 'secondary foreign-policy aim' (Spanger and Wolff, 2017: 5) whose importance lay in the 'moral supremacy' of the West. The liberal Democratic Peace Theory (Russett et al., 1995) and its thesis that democracies are less prone to fight among themselves and, consequently, tend to be more peaceful, have justified Western policies of democracy promotion since the 1990s. This normative foreign policy goal (Jahn, 2012) translated into a broad range of civil society actors, a series of instruments, and assessments to implement and evaluate the results of worldwide democracy promotion policies, mainly implemented by EUUS (Carothers, 2020). In 2008, the percentage of democracies reached 46.1 percent, against 21.8 percent of autocracies (Freedom House, 2019). Later on, this democratisation trend came under increasing pressure, parallel to the rise of non-Western powers like China, Russia, India and Turkey, which perceived democracy promotion as an interference in domestic affairs and a violation of national sovereignty. The rise of autocracies and hybrid regimes illustrated a retreat of the West and the redistribution of political power towards China and Russia, in particular. The trend towards a broader acceptance of hybrid and other forms of non-democratic regimes undermined the traditional negative connotation or self-identification of 'autocracy' and created regional 'authoritarian gravity centres', among them Venezuela itself (Kneuer, 2021).

Democracy support diminished parallel to the resurgence of national populism in EUUS, particularly in the context of migration and an EU identity crisis (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). The violation of migrants' human rights, and the closure of borders before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, undermined the EU's self-promotion as a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002), including the soft export of democracy through aid or diplomacy. Similarly, the rise of populism under Donald Trump in the US (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) and hard democracy promotion by means of sanctions created counterproductive 'rally around the flag' effects in targeted countries: justifying authoritarianism by external threats or 'enemies'. Moreover, the simultaneous rapprochement with the totalitarian North Korean regime and sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela have led to a loss of credibility and coherence in the US discourse of democracy promotion.

Parallel to the decline of democracy promotion, alternatives appeared. Russia sought to strengthen its 'sovereign democracy' (Way, 2015) or personalised autocracy abroad by offering diplomatic, military and economic support to non-democratic regimes in its neighbourhood (Bader, Grävingholt and Kästner, 2010; Way, 2015, 2016). On the other hand, China bolstered its development model through stable, albeit authoritarian, governance in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (Bryant and Chou, 2016), while Cuba exported its 'national revolution' to Venezuela, which became its main client and political ally.

The global rise of authoritarian and hybrid regimes led to an increase in the literature on autocracy promotion, following Peter Burnell's (2010a and 2010b) in-depth analysis of this type of intervention as a countervailing strategy to the normative strengthening

of democracy (Way, 2015 and 2016; Tansey, 2016; Yakouchyk, 2016, 2018; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021). Case studies on China, Russia, India and Turkey, and a debate on the goals, instruments and assessment of autocracy promotion contributed to opening up a new, albeit controversial, area of studies.

In contrast to democracy promotion as a clearly defined policy goal, official discourses rarely favour autocracy. As Hoffmann highlights (Hoffmann, 2018: 118), it remains unclear if certain countries seek to promote autocracy or simply undermine democracy promotion efforts. Tansey (2016: 41) has stressed that authors have 'failed to demonstrate that these efforts can best be understood as a unified, coherent set of foreign policies'. This is why he follows a 'strict definition of autocracy promotion' that requires the explicit intention and ideological preference of external actors to 'bolster autocracy as a form of political regime'. This article uses a minimum definition of autocracy promotion, based on Tansey, as 'the open political, financial and economic support of non-democratic regimes'. Given the difficulties in proving the ideological preference of those external actors, the distinction between 'active and passive autocracy promotion' (Yakouchyk, 2016: 6), seems helpful, and can also be applied to democracy promotion.

By supporting different presidents, the US and Russia have been particularly 'active' and 'aggressive' in their policies on the respective defence of Guaidó and Maduro (see Figure 1). Owing to its dual condition as a domestic and regional actor, Cuba has also played an active role in Venezuela's reverse transition. Compared to these two actors, the EU and China have been passive promoters of either democracy or autocracy.

EUUS: Declining Leverage and Linkage by Coercion

In the Venezuelan conflict, EUUS have agreed on the basics, if not on the details, in a rare example of harmony during a period of transatlantic discord. Both share the goal of regime change by recognising Guaidó as interim president and freezing diplomatic relations with the Maduro regime. Brussels and Washington have imposed sanctions against the post-Chávez regime, although the EU applies selective restrictive measures against individuals while the US under Trump has also introduced sanctions that are similar to a financial and economic embargo (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019). Paradoxically, this strategy of democracy promotion by coercion produced the opposite effect: declining Western leverage and linkage, and a vacuum that has been filled by CCR's increasing bond with the Maduro regime.

All recent US presidents have followed an active and sometimes aggressive democracy promotion strategy through sanctions, with the goal of ending the US-hostile Chavist regime. The bilateral confrontation started in the early years of Chávez's presidency, under the US administration of George W. Bush. His pro-active policy of democracy promotion and regime change led to the US supporting the coup attempt against Chávez in 2002, and immediately recognising the interim government of Pedro Carmona (Romero, 2003: 122). From the beginning of Chavism in 1999 and particularly under the Bush presidency (2001–2009), Washington gave financial and logistical support to the opposition through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), among others. Additionally, Washington imposed an arms embargo, and selective sanctions against members of the Venezuelan government, which included 144 individuals as of October 2020.

In 2011, Barack Obama laid sanctions on the state-owned oil company PDVSA, and in 2014 following a new wave of repression declared Venezuela to be a ‘threat for US national security’ (see Table 1). Financial restrictions imposed by Washington opened the door to additional economic sanctions taken by Trump, in response to Maduro’s fraudulent presidential election in May 2018. The bilateral conflict escalated in January 2019, when the US was the first country to recognise Guaidó as the legitimate president, who later on joined the Organization of American States (Legler and Nolte, 2019). In August 2019, in the midst of negotiations between the regime and the opposition under the auspices of Norway and backed by the EU (Smilde and Ramsey, 2020: 167–168), President Trump imposed new economic measures against the regime, including extraterritorial sanctions (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019).

Washington threatened Venezuela with military intervention in early 2019, but the ‘Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela’ (US State Department, 2020), published on 31 March 2020, discarded that option. The transition plan designed by the US government proposes a Council of State integrated by members of the regime and the opposition, and suggests a sequential path towards fair and competitive elections. The EU’s public support of the initiative confirmed the convergence of EU and US policies towards Venezuela, including on sanctions, which will be gradually lifted if such a transition process begins.

Nonetheless, the viability of a peaceful resolution seems low, bearing in mind that the US and the EU are clearly on one side of the conflict, and seek to impose a democratic transition from the outside. For the EU, the acceptance of an external transition plan designed in Washington stands in sharp contrast to former policies, for example towards Cuba in 2005, when the EU rejected the idea of a ‘blueprint’ for a transition designed in Washington and promoted by ‘Cuba Transition Coordinator’ Caleb McCarry. Another contradiction has been the EU’s opposition to the US embargo and extraterritorial sanctions in Cuba, and the approval of similar US measures in the case of Venezuela where Brussels itself imposed selected sanctions.

In contrast to the US, the EU combines both coercion and diplomacy through the launch of the International Contact Group (integrated by eight European and five Latin American countries), which held several meetings in 2019 and 2020 to support a negotiation between the opposition and the government. Additionally, the EU appointed a ‘Special Envoy for Venezuela’. The combination of smart sanctions and diplomacy makes sense, but the *de facto* end of diplomatic relations between Brussels and Caracas appears to be in clear contradiction to ‘a peaceful and negotiated solution of the crisis’ as stated by all three EU institutions: the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission and the Council.

Despite the convergence on objectives, as with other cases the EU has conflicting positions and interests: the EP seeks to defend human rights in Venezuela (through the 2017 award of the Sakharov Prize to the Venezuelan opposition), and was the first European institution to unconditionally recognise Guaidó as the legitimate interim President of the country in its Resolution on 31 January 2019. Unlike the EP, EU member states divided into a majority of 25 countries that recognised Guaidó, and three states that did not. The EU Council followed the recommendations of the EP, and decided in November 2017 to approve an arms embargo and selective sanctions against members of the Maduro government.

Those ‘restrictive measures’ in EU jargon are still in place and affect 36 individuals of the Maduro regime (see Table 1). In May 2020, the EU and US participated in an international donor conference held in Brussels on Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

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Table 1. Sanctions Imposed by EUUS on Venezuela

	Date	Measures
EU	November 2017	Selected sanctions against seven individuals (Council)
	November 2018	Maintenance of sanctions on those and other . . . individuals
	November 2019	Maintenance of sanctions on those and other individuals (25 in total)
	June 2020	11 officials of the regime are included in the sanctions list
US	2006	Arms embargo, selective sanctions
	2011	Financial sanctions against PDVSA
	2014	Law on human rights violations in Venezuela
	2015	Venezuela: ‘threat to national security’
	2019	Economic sanctions against PDVSA and Citgo
	2020	International order to detain Maduro and other high-ranking members of the government; 144 officials sanctioned

Source: author’s own elaboration.

In October 2020, criticised by those who are against any diplomatic contact with the regime, Borrell, the EU’s High Representative, unsuccessfully sought to negotiate an election delay with the regime to win time for possible opposition participation. During the Maduro regime, the EU tried to find an alternative path of dialogue and negotiation, but played a secondary role in the conflict, among other reasons, because of limited linkages with Venezuela, given that the country is ineligible for aid due to its classification by the European Commission as a ‘highly developed country’. Regarding the material dimension of democracy promotion, the focus on sanctions diminished the linkages between Venezuela, the EU and the US. Low development assistance, limited trade relations (Table 2), a –23.5 percent decline in FDI stock from 2015 to 2018 (https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/overview_venezuela_en.pdf), and diplomatic restrictions reduced the EU’s linkage. EU exports to Venezuela ‘decreased drastically from 6.5 billion Euros in 2012 to 0.69 billion in 2019’, and imports were reduced by half in the same period (<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/venezuela/>). A similar decline occurred in US-Venezuelan trade relations: Venezuelan exports dropped from 38.7 billion to 1.9 billion in 2019 (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c3070.html#2019>), and the country does not receive development assistance or FDI.

Table 2. Linkages and Leverage of CCR and EUUS in Venezuela

	Linkages (material dimension)	Leverage (ideational dimension)
EUUS		
EU	Declining trade exchange (fourth–fifth position), declining FDI stock (\$12.9 billion in 2018), few or no diplomatic contacts with the regime, dialogue with opposition	Democracy, state of law and human rights, development and welfare, regime change, coercion (sanctions) and negotiation, competitive presidential elections
US	Lower trade and FDI prohibited, no diplomatic ties with the regime but its opponents, material support with the opposition	Regime change, democracy, human rights, market economy, competitive presidential elections

Table 2. Continued

	Linkages (material dimension)	Leverage (ideational dimension)
CCR		
Cuba	Ninth trade partner, regular diplomatic contacts at all levels + bilateral visits	Revolutionary export of socialism, state-owned companies, nationalisations, autocracy and citizen control, anti-US discourse, national sovereignty
China	Second Trade partner, loans and FDI stock (\$60 billion), few diplomatic contacts, but technical meetings	Low level diplomacy, recognition of Maduro regime, but limited contacts, national sovereignty, anti-sanctions
Russia	Not among the top ten trading partners, FDI stock (\$20 billion) but arms supply and military equipment + main investor in the oil sector	Close diplomatic ties, regular contacts, anti-US discourse, national sovereignty, against sanctions

Source: Eurostat (trade statistics), author's own elaboration.

A decline in trade (Table 3) as a side-effect of EU, and particularly US, sanctions has led to a growing trade shift towards Asia, particularly China and India, that accounted for more than 40 percent of Venezuelan trade in 2019; effectively replacing the US. In fact, China accounts for 20.1 percent of trade (Table 3), is Venezuela's main creditor, and has become a key economic partner for the Andean country. Cuba occupied sixth place in 2018, but economic relations declined, and in 2019, the Caribbean island accounted for less than 2 percent of total trade, compared to 6 percent the year before. Russia became Venezuela's main investor in the oil sector and, in political terms, the principal rival of the US in the Venezuelan conflict. European direct investment was reduced to a minimum, and US financial sanctions prohibit foreign investment and loans in Venezuela.

In terms of Western linkage and leverage, EUUS policies were counter-productive: sanctions reduced their economic linkages with Venezuela, and limited diplomatic ties with the Maduro regime diminished their former influence and capacity to mediate and promote democracy. This confirms Levitsky and Way's hypothesis (2006: 379) that 'leverage in the absence of linkage has rarely been sufficient to induce democratisation'. In a sense, EUUS sanctions opened new spaces or alternatives for the material and ideational engagement of CCR.

Table 3. Venezuela's Main Trading Partners in 2018 and 2019

Position	Country	2018 (%)	2019 (%)
1	United States	34.1	11.0
2	India	14	20.9
3	China	13.1	20.1
4	Netherlands Antilles	8.9	3.3
5	European Union	4.3	10.3
6	United Arab Emirates	1.0	9.3
7	Malaysia	1.0	2.0
8	Cuba	3.4	1.9

Source: Directorate General for Trade. European Union, Trade in goods with Venezuela [WWW document]. URL https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_venezuela_en.pdf [accessed 3 March 2021].

CCR: Economic Engagement and Autocracy Promotion

CCR and Venezuela share close diplomatic and economic ties, or ‘authoritarian linkage’. President Vladimir Putin established a strategic relationship with Venezuela that occupied the former status of Cuba in Russia’s Latin American policy. Beijing is both a competitor and a partner of Russia, and an economic alternative to the US for Venezuela and Cuba, which are strategic allies with similar ideological preferences. CCR backing of the Venezuelan candidacy for election to the UN Human Rights Council in 2019 was key for the victory of Maduro over the Costa Rican candidacy supported by Western democracies. Venezuela’s integration in the UN body with the help of CCR offered an ‘international protection shield’ against EU and US ‘democracy promotion’, and provided a way to counter these attempts.

High Leverage and Linkage: Russia’s Active Autocracy Promotion

Russia’s engagement in Venezuela can be explained firstly by energy and the political connections between the two authoritarian regimes, which also shared anti-imperialism and charismatic leadership, given that Chávez and Putin assumed power almost simultaneously, in 1999 and 2000. Since 2005, Gazprom, Lukoil and other gas and oil firms have signed significant oil exploration contracts with the Venezuelan state-owned PDVSA. Bilateral cooperation with Russia intensified when Chávez travelled to Moscow in 2008, after an official visit by then president Medvedev to the three ALBA countries Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Relations continued to grow under Maduro and in 2014, when the Venezuelan economy further declined, Rosneft, the largest public oil company responsible for 41 percent of Russian oil production and ‘an instrument of Russian foreign policy’ (Rouvinski, 2019: 6), began to engage with Venezuela’s energy sector. In 2020, Venezuela concentrated Rosneft’s investment abroad and the head of the company, Igor Sechin, stated that ‘my company will never abandon Venezuela’ (Rouvinski, 2019: 9). US sanctions against Sechin and Rosneft increased the costs of economic engagement that reached 20 billion dollars in 2017 (Rouvinski, 2019: 12, Table 4). Given that regime change would risk all Russian investment, maintaining Maduro in power became part of Russia’s domestic agenda to preserve its ‘national interests’, as defined by Putin. Frequent mutual visits at all levels in the context of the 260 agreements signed (see Table 1) reflected the increasing political and economic interdependence that began to replace Venezuela’s former strategic relationship with the US. Russia and the US are also economic rivals in the democracy versus autocracy promotion game. Since 2019, Russia became the regime’s strongest external ally (Bull and Rosales, 2020).

Table 4. China, Cuba and Russia’s Cooperation with the Regime (2013–June 2020)

	Visits and Summits	Institutions	Agreements	Official statements
China	2014 Xi Jinping (Caracas), 2018 Nicolás Maduro (Beijing), 2020 Jorge Arreaza (Beijing)	Since 2001 Venezuela–China High Level Joint Commission (16 meetings until 2018, next in 2020)	Fondo Mixto Chino-Venezolano (2007): 200 projects, 28 new economic agreements in 2018	Several interviews by spokespersons, no official declaration by the Foreign Ministry

Table 4. Continued

	Visits and Summits	Institutions	Agreements	Official statements
Cuba	Several visits per year at all political levels; annual or biannual summits	ALBA, Intergovernmental Commission (20 meetings)	Convenio Integral de Cooperación (30 October 2000): framework agreement – 1,400 agreements signed	30 pages of statements on Venezuela 2018–2020
Russia	Eight (2008 Medvedev in Caracas, 2013 Moscow, 2014 Brazil, 2015 Moscow, Beijing Tehran, 2016 Istanbul, 2019 Moscow, 2020 Caracas (Lavrov)	Russian–Venezuelan Intergovernmental Commission (annually, last meeting in 2020)	260 agreements 2003–2018	Two statements under Maduro and four under Chávez

Source: author’s own elaboration, based on official documents on Venezuela available on the websites of the foreign ministries of CCR and official statements.

Note: The Table is incomplete due to the limited amount of public information.

Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution coincides with Putin’s idea of ‘a new multipolar, anti-US Western order’ and shares a ‘Marxist, socialist ideological basis’ (Rouviniski, 2019). President Putin uses Venezuela as an international test case for his strategy, since the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, to ‘keep the contagion of regime change from spreading to its own shores’ (Herbst and Marczak, 2019). This is not primarily for economic interest, but to combat EUUS’s democracy promotion policies (Yakouchyk, 2016), which explain Putin’s motivation to establish himself as Maduro’s global ally. Russia’s foreign policy underlines that it will ‘counter attempts to use human rights theories to exert political pressure and interfere in the internal affairs of States, including with a view to destabilising them and overthrowing legitimate governments’ (Foreign Ministry, 2016: 45b). Russia even considers ‘unilateral sanctions and other coercive measures a risk to world peace and stability’ (Foreign Ministry, 2013, point h). These remarks confirm Russian criticism of the EUUS’s imposition of ‘democracy promotion through coercion’ on Maduro’s regime.

The defence of sovereignty and the rejection of US sanctions, whose extraterritorial application particularly affects Rosneft, offer another reason for Russian engagement in Venezuela, a country outside its traditional geopolitical interests (Way, 2016). Twenty years of constant exchange at bilateral and international level fostered an alliance based on similar populist styles and ‘comradeship and trust’ (Rouviniski, 2019: 12), combined with economic interests that survived Chávez’s death in 2013 and became even closer under Maduro’s presidency. At that time, Putin declared Venezuela of ‘strategic importance’ for Russia, which continues to date.

More Linkage Than Leverage: China’s Passive Autocracy Promotion

China shares Russia’s defence of UN national sovereignty principles, self-determination and non-interference in domestic affairs (see Table 2). Nonetheless, its policy towards Venezuela is much more cautious, rational, economically oriented and passive. As Bull and Rosales (2020: 11) stress, China ‘has withdrawn from engagement, but nevertheless

contributed to counterbalancing United States-pressure'. On the contrary, others (García Agustín, 2016: 113–114) remarked that 'China has avoided being identified with the anti-imperialist rhetoric'. In fact, the Chinese government avoided official declarations (there are none, besides two press conferences in 2019 with a Foreign Ministry spokesperson), and did not pronounce in favour of Guaidó or Maduro. The lapidary statement 'China supports the efforts made by the Venezuelan government to maintain sovereignty, independence and national stability' does not offer direct political backing of Maduro's position in the conflict, and classifies China as 'a passive autocracy promoter', mainly by linkage. Official rhetoric places China closer to the EU, given that both coincide in their declared preference for 'a peaceful, negotiated solution' of the political conflict.

Beijing's main interest in Venezuela lies in recovering the enormous amount of loans (an estimated 60 billion dollars) as the country's largest foreign creditor and oil investor. In terms of linkage, China maintains official relations with Maduro and has intensified bilateral relations under his presidency (García Agustín, 2016). In contrast to Russia, the engagement does not seek to challenge the US (Brandt and Piña, 2018), but belongs to a general policy against regime change, be it from autocracy to democracy, or the reverse. Apart from those political goals, China's linkages in Venezuela since 2014, after the official visit of Xi Jinping and the strategic partnership, respond to domestic energy needs and the logics of 'extractivism' (García Agustín, 2016).

Venezuela's geographical position, its alliance with Cuba and the regime's anti-hegemonic policy coincide with China's goal to build an alternative under Beijing's leadership that would be unthinkable under a Guaidó or opposition-based government. One example is its flagship Belt and Road Initiative, which Venezuela joined in December 2017. China needs the autocratic Maduro regime to improve its own power status in the region. Indirectly, the autocratic regime offers resistance against a pro-US liberal democracy that would undermine China's economic and political interests in the region, according to the Foreign Ministry's 2016 White Paper on Latin America.

Whereas Cuba established an equal partnership with Venezuela, China and Russia's relationship with Venezuela follows the goal to build an interdependent hegemony. China as a big power and Venezuela as a 'swing state' in between emerging powers and US declining hegemony share the goal to challenge the US by creating an interdependent bloc as an alternative to Washington's post-war policy (García Agustín, 2016: 108). In this context, from Maduro's perspective, China, together with Russia, offers a protective shield against US attempts at regime change, on the one hand, and a guarantee for economic survival through fresh credits and businesses with high levels of corruption in the Russian case (Corrales, 2020: 44; Cardozo and Mijares, 2020). Similar to the EU, but with stronger linkages in terms of trade, loans and diplomacy, China acts as a passive autocracy promoter with low leverage and high linkage as reflected in Figure 1.

High Linkage and Leverage: Cuba's Revolutionary Export

When it comes to autocracy promotion in Latin America, Cuba qualifies as the only country capable of assuming the political and economic costs that such a role involves. The reasons lie in its long resilience to US hostility and a strong and independent foreign policy (Alzugaray, 2015), based on hard and soft power internationalism (Hoffmann, 2018). The export of the Cuban Revolution in Latin America and Africa was an important foreign policy goal to promote 'military leaders that assumed power in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as in Nicaragua' (Romero, 2011: 255). Consequently,

the regime transferred its own resistance to EU and US democracy promotion efforts to Venezuela, and used part of its intelligence services to maintain the regime in power. Closer bilateral relations began in October 2000, when Chávez made his first official visit to the Caribbean island. On that occasion, both countries signed the cooperation framework agreement that is still in place (see Table 1). The deal establishes the supply of up to 53,000 barrels of oil per day to Cuba in exchange for free health services and other technical support in intelligence, security, military and customs services to the Bolivarian Revolution.

As of that moment, Cuba began to support the Bolivarian Revolution and four years later both countries created ALBA – the left-wing ideological bloc to countervail the US project of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Under the slogan ‘Cuba and Venezuela: Two Flags and one Revolution’ (Romero, 2011: 253), the regimes became interdependent: Caracas delivers cheap oil, and Havana sends doctors, advisors and security staff to protect the Bolivarian Revolution. The strategic alliance with Cuba replaced Venezuela’s traditional relationship with the US (Romero, 2011: 269), in terms of human resources, oil transfer, political and security cooperation. To counter Washington’s aggressive strategy of democracy promotion, ‘Authoritarian solidarity has been at the heart of the survival story of Cuba’s revolutionary government’ (Hoffmann, 2018: 119). Up to 40,000 Cuban advisors modelled the Bolivarian Revolution, its ‘Missions’ social programmes (health, education, housing, etc.), and its diplomacy, which with Cuban help pivoted towards China and Russia as well as other strategic sectors like the personal security of the presidents.

For the Cuban government, the maintenance of the Maduro regime conditions the future of its own political system: despite the severe humanitarian crisis, Venezuela still delivers up to 30,000 barrels of oil per day to its main ally. Bilateral exchange goes beyond shared commercial interests. Although the personal friendship between Chávez and his mentor Fidel Castro has not been reproduced after their deaths, shared interests and strong interdependence guaranteed the continuity of the bilateral alliance. Constant official visits at all levels, 30 pages of official statements on Venezuela in the period 2018–2020 on behalf of the Cuban Foreign Ministry to stress its support of Chavism, to condemn US sanctions and all forms of interference in domestic affairs, witness the intense strategic relationship between Cuba’s President Miguel Díaz-Canel and Nicolás Maduro.

For its own economic survival interest, the Cuban regime is an active autocracy promoter in Venezuela with both strong leverage and linkage. The socialist island not only supported, but co-created the Bolivarian Revolution. In the post-Cold War period, Chavism offered the Cuban authorities the unique chance to make their own country ‘safe against democracy’ by exporting its state centred model of political and economic control to Venezuela. Although it is difficult to evaluate whether Cuban influence/interference in domestic affairs contributed to the country’s economic collapse and political conflict, there is little doubt about the key role of Cuban advisors in maintaining the regime through authoritarian means.

Comparing EUUS and CCR: Different Norms and Interests

Venezuela has become the location for an international ideological struggle between democracy and autocracy or sovereignty promotion; or the decadent West and Niall Ferguson’s increasingly powerful ‘Rest’. Within both blocs, interests and policies are

not homogeneous. Firstly, whereas China wishes to preserve its economic interests and maintains a low political profile in Venezuela (passive democracy promoter with more linkage than leverage, see Figure 1), for Russia Venezuela serves as a proxy to fight its historical conflict with the US (active democracy promoter with linkage and leverage) under new conditions. Cuba is part of Venezuela's 'domestic problem' by the binational project of the Bolivarian Revolution – as a copy of its own 'model for Third World development' (Hoffmann, 2018: 123). Cuba (active autocracy promoter with linkage and leverage) is an 'authoritarian gravity center' itself, and Russia as a displaced global power join the club that challenges Western democracy promotion. In contrast, China has acted as the leading provider of financial and economic support for the Venezuelan regime.

The EU (a passive democracy promoter with low leverage and linkage), and the US (an active democracy promoter with declining linkage and leverage) agree on the basics: the goal to initiate a democratic transition by coercion and diplomatic rupture with Maduro by recognising Guaidó. Nonetheless, they employ different instruments: whereas Washington applies embargoes such as sanctions and has abandoned the threat of military intervention, Brussels approves selective measures, rejects any type of military action, and has created the International Contact Group to support a mediation process. Whether the Trump administration really wished to promote a 'peaceful transition' envisaged by Brussels seems as unclear as the EU's coincidence with the US goal of regime change. Divisions within the EU - and specifically Spain's 'muddling through' between Guaidó and Maduro – demonstrate that the EU is a multilevel actor without homogeneous positions or interests in Venezuela.

Weaker Democratic, but Higher Autocratic Leverage and Linkage

Interaction between democracy and autocracy promotion in Venezuela has produced two major results or secondary effects. First, it contributed to the maintenance of the regime because of declining linkage and leverage of the West. By imposing sanctions, EUUS reduced its linkage with Venezuela and lost leverage, whereas the opposite occurred in the case of CCR, which replaced 'the West' and successfully sustained the Maduro regime. China offers the regime investments and loans for its economic survival, Russia delivers arms, know-how in the oil sector and military equipment, and Cuba offers the human resources and intelligence services to defend Maduro against attempts at regime change by EUUS. They represent the alternative to EUUS sanctions, including the arms embargo, which has not worked, because it is countered by autocracy promoters CCR. In particular, Russia's engagement in Venezuela increased parallel to the intensification of sanctions on behalf of the US under the Trump presidency. Figure 1 summarises the level of engagement of the five actors in the Venezuelan conflict: the US and Russia are the most active democracy and autocracy promoters with high linkage and leverage, whereas China shows high linkage, but low leverage, and the EU is a rather secondary player.

Second, the struggle for the international recognition of the regime and/or the opposition. On the diplomatic front, CCR increased its leverage by mobilising allies such as Iran, Turkey and African countries to recognise and support the Maduro regime in opposition to the EEUS bloc of those countries which recognised Guaidó. The election of Venezuela to the UN Human Rights Council in 2019 was part of a successful international pro-Maduro and anti-Western democracy campaign. The West and a fragmented opposition over-estimated their capacity to take power and miscalculated the

strong internal (armed forces, institutions) and external (CCR and other non-Western countries) support for the regime.

Consequently, one example of a reverse ‘interaction’ or undesired effect of democracy promotion has been the increasing acceptance of the Maduro regime by the EU. This trend became visible by the attempt of the EU’s High Representative Borrell, in October 2020, to negotiate with Maduro, against the formal recognition of Guaidó, a delay of parliamentary elections held on 6 December 2020. This failed negotiation provided some evidence of the ideational leverage of European efforts as a soft, but at the same time weak, democracy promoter, and the difficulty to cut diplomatic channels with a regime that is stronger than initially expected and has survived (Alfaro Pareja and Martínez Meucci, 2020). This result, a blocked transition, confirms this article’s initial hypothesis of regime maintenance through an unintended transfer of leverage and linkage from EUUS to CCR. Regarding the second hypothesis of this article, neither the three main supporters of the Maduro regime nor Brussels and Washington are able or willing to negotiate between the parties. The role of these five key actors in the Venezuelan the conflict leaves little room for contributing to a peaceful solution of the crisis. Thus, the polarisation between the two blocs confirms the initial hypothesis that those external actors cannot mediate.

Economic interests are behind all five actors’ engagement in Venezuela, but these are guaranteed by different domestic actors. While the US expects that regime change would allow the country to return to business as usual before Chavism, CCR seek to maintain its ideological and economic alliance with Maduro as a guarantee for trade and investment in the oil and extractive sector. In contrast, the EU has limited economic interests in Venezuela and its role is more ambiguous, given that not all member states have recognised Guaidó.

In sum, the strong reaction of CCR to Western sanctions and attempts of democratisation through regime change was ‘successful’, as Maduro is still in power. Paradoxically, EUUS’s coercive policy of democracy promotion by sanctions and diplomatic restrictions fostered increasing linkages and the autocratic leverage of CCR. By allying with the opposition, in a highly asymmetrical domestic power game with a clear winning force, the regime (Alfaro and Martínez, 2020), EU US ‘chose the losing group’ by underestimating the resistance of the autocratic alliance that helped Maduro to stay in power.

Leverage: Clashing Ideas and Norms between EUUS and CCR

As far as leverage or ideational democracy versus autocracy promotion is concerned, the division of external actors into two opposing blocs represents fundamental differences on at least four key points (see also Table 2): .

- (i) Liberal Democratic Peace versus Self-Determination. The narrative or normative belief in democratic peace theory as a principle of foreign policy or, in the case of the US, a cynical justification for ‘intervention’, motivated EUUS to become part of the internal power struggle in Venezuela. On the other hand, the opposing CCR bloc firmly rejects any type of interference in ‘domestic affairs’, which, notwithstanding, contradicts Cuba’s own policy of exporting revolution to Venezuela.
- (ii) Responsible versus National Sovereignty. Different interpretations of sovereignty explain the behaviour of the groups. CCR coincide in the traditional interpretation

of national sovereignty and self-determination as the two fundamental principles of the UN, not least as a system of protection against ‘interventions’ by the US or EU. In contrast, EUUS defend a concept of ‘responsible sovereignty’ related to the Responsibility to Protect. The UN Security Council debate on Venezuela, held in January 2019, illustrated the deep divisions between ‘the permanent five’, who were not able to find any point of consensus.

- (iii) The ‘legitimacy of sanctions’ that the US first imposed, which was then followed by the EU. The CCR group clearly rejects proactive sanctions and coercive measures outside the United Nations, as something that has been a prerogative of the West. Paradoxically, in terms of linkage and leverage, CCR benefitted from sanctions that they reject.
- (iv) The instrument of diplomatic recognition as a tool to establish or delegitimise governments is a highly controversial issue, even in Western countries. In January 2019, the Austrian Foreign Minister asked if it is possible to recognise parliaments or legislative powers as legitimate executive powers. The decision to recognise Guaidó and cut relations with Maduro was based on the (wrong) assumption that the opposition is strong enough to surpass the regime and to divide the armed forces. This miscalculation explains why Spain and part of the EU began to move in between the opposition and the regime. The instrument of recognition is clearly rejected as an interference in internal affairs by CCR, which continue to support Maduro. Given that their own electoral processes do not meet democratic criteria, such as pluralism or transparency, they support similar procedures in Venezuela as a strategy of autocracy promotion with the goal of justifying their own political models and gaining new allies.

Conclusion

Venezuela’s blocked transition or authoritarian consolidation is partly the result of conflict between CCR and EUUS and, thus, provides a strong case study for the interaction between autocracy and democracy promotion. These countries’ involvement in the conflict on opposing sides has fed and internationalised what originally was a domestic conflict. The crisis cannot be solved ‘by the Venezuelan people’, who are its main victims, but requires a consensus between democracy and autocracy promoters to overcome the internal and external political stalemate.

In the internal conflict, CCR placed themselves on the side of the regime as part of their foreign policies of national sovereignty, self-determination and non-interference in internal affairs, and political and/or economic interests in Venezuela (Table 2). In this sense, conflicting interpretations of international norms and instruments like sovereignty or sanctions contributed to the external power struggle.

Given that none of the five actors fulfils the condition of ‘neutrality’ as a prerequisite for a successful mediation, this contradicts their official statements in favour of ‘a peaceful democratic transition’ in Venezuela. The intrusive and coercive democracy promotion strategy of the EU and the US clashes with the counter-reaction of autocracy promotion by Cuba and Russia, while China’s strong economic involvement does not change the fact that it is a minor political player in this power game.

US embargo-like sanctions and the EU’s coercive measures provide the Maduro regime with strong arguments to support its theory that there is an external conspiracy

against the Bolivarian Revolution: ‘the hardened sanctions, have complicated the politics of regime transition’ (Corrales, 2020: 50). On the other hand, EUUS’s similar policy reflects certain coherence, but does nothing to find a way out of the crisis.

Despite the sanctions and a severe humanitarian crisis, the beginning of 2021 saw the Maduro regime still in power and in charge of all three executive branches after recovering the National Assembly in elections on 6 December 2020 that had been boycotted by most opposition parties. This fact has strengthened anti-democracy promoters and weakened EUUS, which scored ‘an own goal’ by reducing leverage and linkage. Venezuela has become a new battlefield for the ideological and interest-driven struggle between ‘the West and the Rest’, posing an important obstacle to a negotiated and peaceful solution of the political conflict.

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