



ELECTION OBSERVERS FROM RUSSIA
IN LATIN AMERICA: MISSIONS FROM
AND FOR AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Presentation

At the end of September 2022, in occupied territories of Ukraine, the Russian Federation rushed to carry out a so-called ‘annexation referendum’ which would make residents that are eligible to vote be confronted with questions of whether they wanted to be part of the Federation. More specifically, the Ukrainian regions (oblasts) of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia were captured in February 2022 when the most recent Russian invasion began. The regions (republics) of Donetsk and Luhansk, which have been under the control of separatist forces for almost eight years, declared their independence from Ukraine during the Civil War of 2014 after having independence referendums not being recognized by international communities.

The annexation referendums were Russia’s most recent efforts to formally incorporate these territories into the Federation, and it can be described as an electoral simulation that Moscow attempted to pass off as democratic elections. According to Russia’s Central Election Commission, 99% vote in favor of annexing Donetsk and 98% in favor of incorporating Luhansk with more than a 90% turn out. The same goes for the case of Kherson where the official results gave 87% in favor of annexation and Zaporizhzhia having 93% voted in favor. Both cases have more than 85% participation.

As part of the strategy to give a modicum of credibility to the elections, Russia invited ‘election observers’ to attest to the integrity of the process. A Russian official said, ‘more than 100 international observers from 40 countries’ were present to monitor the referendums. The group was composed of politicians, bloggers, youth leaders, and other personalities who were all sympathetic to the Russian ruling party, and they acted in violation of the 2005 Declaration of Principles for the International Election Observation.

It is not the first time that Russia uses the figure of electoral observation to seek validation on its own or for others’ elections. In fact, it is a very refined practice that they share with other electoral autocracies and authoritarianisms in the world to make electoral processes look democratic and integral.

In this special report for *Transparencia Electoral*, DemoAmlat, Vladimir Rouvinski, and Juan Pablo Milanese revealed the details of how Russia uses the figure of electoral observation to exert an incisive illiberal influence to validate elections which lack integrity, including Latin American regions.



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Russia's Election Observers in Latin America: Missions from and for Authoritarian Regimes

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1 Introduction

Since Robert Dahl (1971) coined the term polyarchy, there is a relative consensus regarding the basic attributes that define what we understand as a democracy. At least, in its most minimalist version, one of these properties that distinguish itself is the holding of 'free, periodic and fair elections'. Naturally, its existence is not a sufficient condition to distinguish this type of regime; however, it is indisputably a necessary condition. In other words, transparent and competitive elections are one of the vehicles that must be demanded for the functioning of a genuine democracy. However, as noted, the holding of election is not sufficient to ensure the presence of democracy.

From this perspective, the observation of the integrity of electoral processes has become a relevant part of the foreign policy of democratic states as they are guided by the ideas of a peaceful democracy. Additionally, it constituted a crucial point on the agenda of both multilateral governmental organizations and global civil society, through which it was sought to strengthen the process of building (or recovering) democratic institutions in those countries that were going through a phase of the transition to democracy (Carothers 1997).

During the last decades, electoral monitoring has spread practically all over the world; if electoral observation contributes not only to the strengthening but to the maintenance of the quality of democracy because of the greater confidence that is deposited in electoral processes. This is mainly because it can deter fraud, voter intimidation, and the exercise of violence associated with this type of election.

In this context, it is interesting to note that, parallel with the global expansion of authoritarianism (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022), non-democratic regimes have learned to use this type of mission to support the legitimacy of others related to them and to strength their own. This trend is particularly worrisome in Latin America and the Caribbean (Malamud and Nunez 2021). It is precisely in this region where one of the most important authoritarian regimes, in terms of its commitment to transforming the liberal international order of Vladimir Putin's Russia, stands out for the participation of its electoral missions. Especially in the most intensely questioned and contested elections in recent years for the region, Venezuela in 2018, 2020 and Nicaragua in 2016, 2021 can be highlighted.

Based on these premises, the present work aims to characterize this type of observation. First, the focus should be on the reason behind Russia's interest in sending missions to this part of the world and the use that this country gives to missions in Latin America. Secondly, the focus should be on why these countries agree with such observations. Finally, in the last part of this essay, the authors offer some reflections on how to assess the impact of Russia's observer missions and of other authoritarian countries.

2 Why does Russia have Interests in Monitoring Elections in Latin America?

There are several reasons why authoritarian regimes are interested in sending observer missions abroad. The first has to do with the fact that ‘the observation of elections became a common practice of sovereign states... [A]lthough not yet universal, it is now widely recognized as central to the task of holding genuine elections’ (Merloe 2015, 80). In this context, the presence of election observers during these elections is part of contemporary democratic normality (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). In fact, a threshold has been crossed from the point of view of their institutionalization, taking them for granted in this type of process (Ibid, 895). Thus, the presence of foreign observers during elections is not questioned. It is even perceived as a necessary condition for acquiring legitimacy vis-a-vis the international community.

It should not be surprising that in the beginning of the 90s, Russia sought to expand both the presence of electoral missions in the elections held in its own territory and the number of observer missions sent to other countries. At the same time – and unlike cases in the United States or the European Union where a large part of the observers is not linked to official structures of their states but form independent missions- observers in elections abroad are almost exclusively sent under the auspices of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Russian Federation, the country’s electoral authority. While this is formally an independent authority, several investigations have shown that the CEC works in close harmony with other Russian state authorities, especially with the President’s Administration and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for abroad observer missions (Popova 2006, Chelisheva 2021, Russian Elections Monitor 2021) .¹

The existence of links between CEC and other branches of power is indisputably relevant because it makes it possible to trace the correlation between the mandate of an observer mission and the goals of Russian foreign policy. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, they are designed based on the idea of symbolic reciprocity that has been a constant in the establishment of the Kremlin’s strategy towards the region since the early 2000s (Rouvinski 2022). This type of reciprocity can be understood as reciprocal actions, especially of a symbolic nature, in response to what the Russian authorities consider to be the incidence of Western countries in the territories of the former USSR. The latter seeks, according to the vision of the Putin government, to diminish Russian influence in this geographical area.

It should be clarified that the ruling elite of contemporary Russia considers the territory of the former Soviet Union a ‘near foreigner’; that is, the most important geographical area for Moscow outside the Russian borders. In fact, they are convinced that Moscow has the right to safeguard its special interests in this area due to geostrategic considerations and the continuity of historical, cultural, and economic ties.

Therefore, post-Soviet Russian leaders insist that all neighboring governments must consider Russia’s special interests before deciding to move forward in their relations with countries of the former USSR. Thus, most of these elites are convinced that the United States and its Western allies systematically ignore Kremlin’s interests for the territories of former USSR. Consequently, they insist

¹ To see more precise data on this assessment, it is worth observing the EMB autonomy indicator produced by the V-Dem program (<https://www.v-dem.net/>) which indicates that this organization can be described as completely controlled, de facto, by the government of that country

on maintaining their presence in Latin America, understood as the American ‘near abroad’, as a sign of reciprocity.

From this perspective, sending missions to the Western Hemisphere can be seen as a response to the presence of Western observers and Washinton’s approval (or rejection) of election results in countries like Ukraine or Belarus.

The second motivation behind this Russian interest is the use of observer missions as a sharp power tool. This can be described as ‘authoritarian influence efforts to penetrate and pierce the political and informational environments of targeted countries’ (Walker and Ludwig 2017). From this analytical perspective, the notion of acute power makes it possible to precisely assess more of the impact of Russian missions on electoral processes in Russia’s allied countries in the region. As will be shown below, it serves as Moscow’s sharp power vehicle that allows Vladimir Putin’s government to legitimize the actions of authoritarian governments in the context of contested elections, and thus ‘cut through the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions’ (Walker and Ludwig, Ibid).

Table 1. Russian Observers in Latin America: Motivations and Actions

Motivation	Russian Actions
Regulatory Pressure (Election Observation as a Norm)	Russia presents as a country that supports democratic election standards
Symbolic Reciprocity	Sends observation missions to elections in Latin America as a response to the participation of Western observers in elections for Russia’s ‘near abroad’ countries
Legitimizing Authoritarian Allied Regimes	Certify contested elections in Russia’s allied countries in the region
Sharp Power	Using observer missions as a tool of sharp power
Source for Media Coverage	Media coverage of the Russian observers’ work in the media and in Latin America’s media

Finally, the presence of Russian election observers in Latin American elections offers opportunities for media coverage that favors the interest of Moscow and its regional allies. Both the media controlled by the Russian government (Actual RT and Sputink World) and local media uses the reports of Russian observers to support the local authorities, especially in scenarios where the results are questioned by opposition like the United States, the European Union, the Organization of American States, and independent observers from other Western countries.

3 The Modus Operandi of Russian Observers in Latin America

Among the formal bases that facilitate the planning and conduct of Russian observer mission in the region are the agreements signed between CEC, Latin American, and Caribbean electoral authorities (Table 2). There is a total of eight that the CEC concluded with Latin American states out of thirty-four around the world (not including the quasi-sovereign Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the electoral cooperation agreements with multilateral organizations).

With regards to their core objectives, except for one, these agreements express the intention to encourage the development and deepening of cooperation in the field of improving legislation on

elections and referendums, improving the political culture of participants in electoral and referendum processes, and developing the usage of modern electoral technologies. The exception notes reside in the agreement with Brazil, where the signatory parties affirm that they “seek to reaffirm the commitment to democracy with faith in free elections and fair democratic processes, respecting human rights”. In addition to the “strengthening of democratic institutions to improve electoral administration and management” (Memorandum of Understanding 2011).

Returning to the first case, the activities planned for the development of these agreements concentrate on supporting “the activities of electoral bodies; raising the professional level of organizers and electoral culture; ensuring the performance of participants; and the implementation of election technology”. Again, in the case of Brazil, the cooperation agenda is formulated differently, namely, “promotion of activities seeking to strength the electoral system; exchange of knowledge and experience in the organization and conduct of the electoral process; staff training; facilitation of relations with other electoral entities; improvement of electoral culture and implementation of electoral technology” (Ibid).

At the time of the signing for the agreement between the Russian and Latin American electoral authorities, it was expected to have “results of joint investigations focused on preparation and conduct of election, draft electoral laws; exchange of election observers, hold seminars on topics of mutual interest; send representatives to form observation missions among others”. Additionally, all agreements, except with Brazil, are mentioning technological tools such as “counting automation, voter identification process, automated voting, verification and counting, management, storage and transmission of databases”.

This last point is particularly significant since, according to several reports, Russian observers have shown continued interest in electoral technology issues during their missions in the region. Thus, highlighting the vital importance of knowledge of electoral data for the success of electoral campaigns as demonstrated by the case of Russian interference in the Bolivian electoral campaign reported by independent researchers (Proekt 2019), along with other reports by media and governments in the region.

Another important aspect has to do with the apparently ‘very fine’ planning and coordination of all public activities related to Russian observer missions in Latin America. At the same time, Russia’s allies benefits from extensive media coverage from each mission, both in that country and in the region. In this type of coverage, emphasis is placed on ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ of their observations and rejection –in the case of missions to non-competitive elections- of the positions of democratic countries on the matter. In this context, it is striking that the Russian observer missions use such technical evidence as aspects of the organization’s vote for more than any other dimension of the electoral process and ignore the denunciations made by the opposition forces.

Table 2: Russia’s cooperation agreements with electoral authorities in Latin America and the Caribbean

Country	Date of Agreement Signature	Status
Bolivia	January 27, 2009	In Effect
Brazil	May 16, 2011	In Effect
Costa Rica	February 5, 2016	In Effect
Ecuador	December 5, 2013	In Effect
Mexico	March 16, 2010	In Effect
Peru	November 24, 2008	In Effect
Dominican Republic	June 4, 2014	In Effect
Venezuela*	May 15, 2018	In Effect

*Replacement of the previous agreement signed in 2013

Source: Central Election Commission of Russia; <http://www.cikrf.ru>. Note: OAS signed the agreement with CEC on March 3, 2012, but in April 2022, Russia lost its status as the OAS Observer State, which prevented the continuation of the implementation of the agreement.

The other relevant aspect is the composition of the missions. In cases where the international community has questioned the transparency of the electoral process before the date of the elections, Russian chose to send senior officials of the Russian government or parliament to the observer mission – and even ambassadors – to participate as observers.

4 Elections in Venezuela

Given the important of Venezuela as a key ally of Moscow in the region (Rouvinsky 2022), it should not be surprising the presence of a Russian observer mission in one of the elections questioned the most by the international community.

In this case, it is important to note that, as criticism from observers in democratic countries regarding the integrity of these elections has intensified, Russia has prioritized them. Thus, for example, in the 2015 elections, the CEC delegation consisted of only three people, all were officials of CEC (Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, 2016). At the time, the presence of observers from several countries could still be appreciated, and the role played by Russian observers were rather protocolary, allowing compliance with the agreement signed between the electoral authorities of Venezuela and Russia in 2013 (Telesur TV 2013). However, the scenario of the 2018 elections changed significantly. In them, Moscow spared no effort regarding the presence of observers with the aim of supporting the government of Nicolas Maduro.

In fact, that same year, the announcement about the arrival of Russian observers to monitor the presidential elections was made by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza (RIA Novosti 2018a). According to this official, “the international companions will be in charge of spreading the truth to the world about the presidential and legislative council elections” (Telsur 2018). A few days before the start of the election, one of the highest CEC officials in charge of international affairs, Vasiliy Likhachev, spoke on behalf of Russia and “called not to interfere in the elections in Venezuela” (Izvestiya 2018). To create an impression that the Russian observers also represent civil society and are independent, individuals who were not formally employed by the CEC were incorporated among the observers. For example, among them was the coordinator of the Association of Russian Observers

‘National Public Monitoring’ Roman Kolomoistsev, who highlighted the level of ‘transparency’ in Venezuelan elections. Needless to say, Kolomoitsev simultaneously served on the ‘Scientific and Expert Council’, a structure directly affiliated with the CEC.

A similar situation can be seen with the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law’s president’s, Igor Borisov, presentation who served as a board member of the CEC. Additionally, its current institution is known for its unconditional approval of the Russian electoral authorities. This justifies the political persecution of the opposition, including Alexei Navalny, who was accused of receiving funds from abroad to allegedly finance his election campaign in the elections for mayor in Moscow (Nekhezin and Krechetnikov 2013). The members of this institute also received recognition from the CEC.²

Borisov characterized the Venezuelan elections as ‘unique’ in terms of ‘transparency and compliance with democratic norms’ (Ria Novosti 2018b). It is worth emphasizing that Borisov’s participation was not limited only to the ‘accompaniment’ of the ruling party in the elections but to an extensive public analysis about ‘the improvements’ associated with international monitoring in one of the most read sites among those dedicated to debating Latin American issues in Russia (Borisov 2018). In addition, the author stressed that “Venezuelans give a slightly different legal meaning to the presence of international electoral observers than the one that has developed in the post-Soviet space under the authoritarian pressure of the OSCE” and have “created a system of guarantees for electoral campaigns, unique in world practice” (Ibid).

Additionally, being part of the same circle of analysts close to the Russian government, the author did not miss the opportunity to ‘wash’ the image of the Venezuelan government, ratifying the explanations given by the local authorities about ‘the absence of political prisoners in Venezuela’ in the same way that Putin affirms in Russia under the argument that members of the political opposition are in jail not for the exercise of opposition but ‘because they violated the law’ (Ibid). Borisov concluded the job description of observers in the 2018 Venezuelan elections with the following observation: “it seemed that international observers, gathered on almost every continent, acted as a ‘human shield’ against foreign intervention in this freedom-loving country” (Ibid). It should be remembered that neither American nor European Union missions participated in the 2020 elections.

It is also important to note that the mission of the Russian observers in Venezuela was attended by high-ranking politicians with a delegation from the Russian Parliament that included representatives of all the parties that are part of this collectivity. Among them, for example, was Konstantin Kosachev, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Policy Committee (Council of Federations) and well known in Latin America for his visits to the region in his capacity as the chairman of Russian Agency for International Cooperation Rossotrudnichestvo. Beyond legitimizing the elections as ‘transparent and fair’ and ‘despite pressure from outside the country’, Kosachev characterized the absence of observers from Western countries as ‘political rudeness’ (Vyatchanin 2020).

The role of Russian observers in legitimizing the Chavista regime was recognized by Maduro himself when he met with the Russian observer mission at the Miraflores palace shortly after the elections. During the meeting, Maduro expressed his gratitude to Vladimir Putin for sending observers

² see, for example, resolution No. 1124/952-6 of May 17, 2012, of the CEC, which recognizes the two members of the Institute ‘for assistance in the organization of electoral processes’

to Venezuela (Vesti.ru 2020). It should be noted that it is rare that a head of state receives election observers in this way exclusively, i.e., only from one country among several sent by the observers.

In November 2021, on the eve of the regional elections, in which the opposition participated for the first time after several years of boycott, it was Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who announced the sending of the observers. It is striking that this announcement was made during a meeting with Venezuelan delegation in Moscow on November 8th and just a few days after the rejection of the results for the Nicaragua election, Russia's other ally seemingly by the United States.

Since one of the purposes of the observer participation is to constitute themselves as a source of information for the government-controlled media, which favors the Kremlin's official position, one can find many conclusions that observers make regarding the claims made by the observers. For example, covering the 2018 elections, Sputnik published a story under the title 'Russian observer: Venezuelan elections meet international standards'. In it, he interviewed Vasilij Likhachev and quoted, "starting from international electoral standards, I can say that here they are largely met" (Sputnik World 2018a).

That same space was also used to reject the position of the United States, which 'without waiting for the preliminary vote count, made an official statement that it did not recognize the elections held in Venezuela. This approach is deeply regrettable because all the data that accuses the legitimacy of the expression of will of the Venezuelan people does not benefit the United States' (Sputnik Mundo 2018b). In another publication for the same medium, Lijachev spoke of how Venezuela "has created a system of state, political, and legal guarantees so that its citizens can exercise their right to vote...as a specialist I can say that the 46% participations is within the framework of the international trend that indicates if Venezuelan elections are honest, transparent, and open" (Ibid).

In addition, it was not only the Russian media that made use of the presence of Russian observers in the elections. Even some of the most consulted media in the region offered news related to the presence of Russian observers who confirmed transparency and compliance with democratic norms during the 2018 elections, such as the EFE agency that serves as a news source for thousands of news programs in Latin America and the Caribbean (EFE 2018).

5 2021 Elections in Nicaragua

As was the case for the Venezuelan case, the existence of elections in the Nicaraguan case is far from confirming the existence of a democratic regime. In fact, as Shelley McConnell points out, "the Nicaraguan electoral process did not meet the minimum standards required for a democracy", knowing that this would happen long before the election itself (McConnell 2021). The seven opposition leaders, who aspired to run for presidency, were arrested on trumped-up charges, and three political parties were banned (Ibid; Marti I Puig et al 2022). Finally, after elections, the government of the Central American country did not allow the figures of the results to be verified, showing the opacity of the electoral process (McConnell 2021).

Today, Nicaragua is one of Russia's staunchest allies in the region, at least since 2008, has been supporting virtually all of the Kremlin's actions in the international arena: Daniel Ortega's government was the first government (except for Russia) to recognize the independence of the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008; the annexation of Crimea in 2014; and most recently voted

against the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly condemning Russia's annexation of regions of Ukraine in October 2022. At the same time, Russia maintains systematic support for Ortega in multilateral forums, as well as offering positive coverage in media sponsored or affiliated with the Russian government.

One of the most emblematic examples of the importance Russia attaches to its observer missions is the general elections in Nicaragua held on November 7, 2021. According to the OAS report, the electoral process “did not comply with any of the essential elements of democracy, described in the Inter-American Democratic Charter” (OAS 2021). Additionally, most American countries rejected the election results during the OAS General Assembly on November 12, 2021, while the European Union declared the elections ‘illegitimate’ (DW 2021). However, in his message acknowledging the results of the elections, Minister Lavrov referred to the testimonies of the Russian observer mission to justify Russia's position contrary to those of the OAS and the European Union: “[I]n sent observers...and according to his testimony, the elections were held in an organized manner and with compliance with Nicaraguan legislation, the epidemic rules imposed by covid-19 and significant citizen participation” (Infobae 2021). Minister Lavrov also took the opportunity to denounce the role of the United States, which “promoted an unacceptable campaign not to recognize the results” (Ibid).

On the occasion of the 2021 elections, the Russian delegation was chaired by the deputy chairman of the committee for international affairs of the Russian parliament Dmitriy Novikov (Tass 2021). Another member of the mission, also member of the Russian parliament, Vladimir Poletaev, characterized the role of international observers as “important to ensure the transparency and legitimacy of the elections, compliance of the electoral process and local legislation with international standards” (Novosti Gornogo Altaia 2021). In the same press conference, Poletaev continued, “observers become ‘eyes and ears’ on the international stage. Any pressure is prohibited, so our information arrives without distortion” (Novosti Gornogo Altaia 2021).

Additionally, it is worth paying attention to the fact that among the members of the observer mission, it stands out belonging to the Russian Society of Political Scientists (ROP according to its abbreviation in Russian). It unites political scientists working in universities, academic research institutions and government agencies. The remarkable thing about the case is that, beyond their membership in this professional association, these observers are part of a group of experts from the CEC of the Russian Federation, as is the case of Professor Andrey Shutov, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at Lomonosov Moscow State University. He was accompanied to Managua by ROP Executive Director Igor Kuznetsov and two other ROP experts, namely Mikhail V Gorbachev and Irina Dashkina. All these experts have a doctorate in political studies and their presence within the payroll of the mission sought to legitimize, even more, the dubious electoral process. It is noteworthy that instead of evaluating the most important aspects of the day –from the perspective of electoral analysis- the experts highlighted the ‘ties of friendship between the Russian and Nicaraguan peoples’ and other types of details unrelated to the observation exercise. At a press conference organized in Managua upon the hearing the official results of the elections, Dr. Shutov declared that “before anything, I would like to share the moving impression of the people, who demonstrated discipline and unconditional responsibility for the destiny of their country during this election campaign” (Russian Society of Political Scientists, 2021).

The analysis of the activities of the observers allows us to affirm that their presence in the country responded both to the interest of Russian foreign policy (in terms of symbolic reciprocity and sharp power), and served as support for the position Daniel Ortega's government that insisted on the democratic and transparent nature of the process, despite the abundance of evidence that can claim the contrary. Specifically, the Russian authorities used the observations to reject OAS and European Union allegations on the violations of democratic norms in Nicaragua and managed to provide alternative coverage of the election results in media inside and outside the region.

Simultaneously, and even though the composition of the mission included experts on political issues, the work of the observers focused on the technical aspects of access to voting points, in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, other than on the compliance with electoral guarantees for all relevant actors. The presence of high-level Russian leaders in the mission also ensured the fulfilment of the political mandate of the Russian government, rather than an independent and impartial assessment. For the Ortega government and its followers, who faced the overwhelming rejection of the international community, the Russian wink was constituted as an opportunity to appeal to the work of foreign observers and justify the results of the election day (El 19 Digital 2021).

6 Final Considerations

The holdings of elections have acquired considerable relevance from a global point of view. Even in cases singularized by the existence of non-democratic regimes, it seems to be a requirement that every political system must face. Within this framework, just as the ritualization of election days seems to an indispensable requirement, an increase and diversification of the 'offer' of electoral observation also proposed by states with authoritarian governments is also beginning to be appreciated. One of the most obvious cases is that of the Russian Federation. Indeed, the presence of election observers in Latin America from Russia highlights the existence of new dynamics in relations with it and its allies in the region. The sending of these missions seeks to take advantage of a tool that produces legitimacy, since the wink of foreign observers (who confirm the compliance of the electoral process with the standards of transparency and impartiality) contributes to the acceptance of the results.

Within this framework, and even though many of the elections that Russian observers evaluate as impeccable are not even free and competitive, their presence allows authoritarian governments to offer an alternative narrative to those posed by other mission promoted by organization constituted by effectively democratic states.

To this is added the penetration of Latin America information spaces with the use of Spanish-language state media controlled by the Russian government, in addition to other sources of public opinion information. Since Russia has electoral observation agreements not only with authoritarian countries, but also with countries where electoral processes largely meet standards of transparency and impartiality, Russian participation in elections in Latin America as observers contributes to the erosion of democratic norms and risks devaluing the work of observer missions from other countries.

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