



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.19>

UDC 327.8

LBC 66.4(7Coe)

Submitted: 01.09.2023

Accepted: 15.11.2023

US SANCTIONS POLICY TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA: CASES OF OFFICIAL NARRATIVES ON CUBA, VENEZUELA, AND NICARAGUA¹

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The following article examines the effectiveness of US sanctions on Latin America by analyzing three cases of restrictive measures against Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. The correlation between US foreign policy goals and the interpretation of the existing sanctions results containing the official narrative is analyzed. This study shows that, from the point of view of promoting democratization and protecting human rights, US sanctions are ineffective. *Methods and materials.* The following research utilizes a constructivist approach when analyzing international relations. To a greater extent, this work is based on the theoretical approaches of Professor G. Hufbauer. *Analysis and results.* The following study additionally reveals that the US foreign policy narrative covers the erosion of US hegemony in Latin America. Within this narrative, international relations are described as a global rivalry between “democracy” and “autocracy.” The United States uses motives for protecting human rights and democracy to justify sanctions against several Latin American countries and also weaken ties with Russia and China. *Author’s contributions.* L. Sokolshchik and Yu. Sokolshchik developed the research design in addition to writing its content and general scientific editing. K. Teremetskiy made a contribution to the search for official sources and their analysis. The authors jointly analyzed all the content and results of the research.

Key words: United States of America, Latin America, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, sanctions, official narrative.

Citation. Sokolshchik L.M., Sokolshchik Yu.S., Teremetskiy K.S. US Sanctions Policy Towards Latin America: Cases of Official Narratives on Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 4. Istoriya. Regionovedenie. Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University. History. Area Studies. International Relations], 2024, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 214-224. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.19>

УДК 327.8

ББК 66.4(7Coe)

Дата поступления статьи: 01.09.2023

Дата принятия статьи: 15.11.2023

САНКЦИОННАЯ ПОЛИТИКА США НА ЛАТИНОАМЕРИКАНСКОМ НАПРАВЛЕНИИ: КЕЙСЫ ОФИЦИАЛЬНЫХ НАРРАТИВОВ В ОТНОШЕНИИ КУБЫ, ВЕНЕСУЭЛЫ И НИКАРАГУА¹

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В работе исследуется вопрос эффективности санкционной политики США на латиноамериканском направлении на основе анализа трех кейсов ограничительных мер против Кубы, Венесуэлы и Никарагуа. Анализируется корреляция между целями внешней политики США и интерпретацией наличествующих результатов санкций, содержащейся в официальном нарративе. Исследование показывает, что с точки зрения заявляемых целей демократизации и защиты прав человека санкции США являются неэффективными. *Методы и материалы.* Исследование основано на теории конструктивизма в международных отношениях, а также в значительной степени – на теоретических разработках Г. Хафбауэра. В работе применяются агентоцентричный и региональный подходы. *Анализ и результаты.* Исследование показывает, что внешнеполитический нарратив США вуалирует эрозию американской гегемонии в регионе. Международные отношения описываются США как соперничество «демократии» и «автократии» в глобальном масштабе. Мотивы защиты прав человека и демократии используются США для оправдания санкций против ряда латиноамериканских стран, в том числе для ослабления их связей с Россией и Китаем. *Вклад авторов.* Л.М. Соколыщик и Ю.С. Соколыщик разработали структуру исследования, содержание статьи и осуществили ее общенаучное редактирование. К.С. Теремецкий внес вклад в поиск официальных источников и их анализ. Авторы совместно подготовили содержание и результаты исследования.

Ключевые слова: Соединенные Штаты Америки, Латинская Америка, Куба, Венесуэла, Никарагуа, санкции, официальный нарратив.

Цитирование. Соколыщик Л. М., Соколыщик Ю. С., Теремецкий К. С. Санкционная политика США на латиноамериканском направлении: кейсы официальных нарративов в отношении Кубы, Венесуэлы и Никарагуа // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 4, История. Регионоведение. Международные отношения. – 2024. – Т. 29, № 1. – С. 214–224. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.19>

Introduction. Sanctions are one of the key foreign policy instruments used by the United States (US). Currently, there is no other country in the world that resorts to using economic restrictive measures quite like the United States [16, p. 159]. However, the paradox of its sanctions policy is that the sanction goals, or at least those declared officially, are not achieved most of the time [7, p. 116]. In many ways, US economic restrictive measures against Latin American countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua serve as a vivid illustration of this paradoxical phenomenon.

Sanctions effectiveness is one of the most controversial issues in their study. According to a research project by G. Hufbauer and his colleagues, only a third of sanction cases prove successful [28, pp. 3-5]. R. Pape, criticizing the conclusions of the scholars, gives an even more modest number of effective sanctions cases; in his opinion, only 5 percent can be considered successful [38, pp. 93-94]. Moreover, sanctions

often go far beyond their original goals [20, p. 6], introducing negative consequences for both the initiator state and the country that has been restricted [14, p. 47; 16, p. 159]. In this context, various important research questions arise regarding the extent to which sanctions can be considered an effective US foreign policy tool and what factors contribute to this success.

The aim of this paper is to study the effectiveness of US sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua by analyzing official narratives presented by the White House. For this purpose, the work rests on a comparative analysis of US foreign policy goals to protect liberal values and democratize targeted countries, with an interpretation of the actual results of sanctions in the chosen cases.

Methods and materials. The following study centers its analysis around the international relations theory of constructivism. The authors start from the idea that international events do not occur in a vacuum; the meaning of an event

is given in the aftermath of interpreting how political agents pursue their goals [31, p. 810]. One major US foreign policy goal, which is often reflected as part of the official US narrative, is the protection of liberal values, human rights, and democracy in various countries and regions of the world. The following work proceeds from the assumption that it is possible to assess the effectiveness of US sanctions by correlating the interpretation of their results with the stated foreign policy goal of aiding in the democratization of the target countries. This article mainly focuses on the Biden administration's official narrative regarding its sanctions policy towards Latin America.

This study is based on an agent-centric approach. It suggests that actors (states and political leaders) "create, mobilize, disseminate, and challenge narratives" to encourage other international players to act in accordance with their scenario [23, p. 418]. This research paper focuses on one region specifically in order to provide geographic and narrative limits on the subject researched and help form a pool of cases for analysis.

When analyzing sanctions, the theoretical approaches of G. Hufbauer and his colleagues are considered in great detail. Sanctions are viewed as the "deliberate actions of the state (the initiator country), a coalition of such states or international organizations to reduce, restrict, or withdraw from customs, trade, or financial relations with the 'target country' or 'addressee country' to achieve political goals" [28, pp. 3-5].

The decision to use three case studies allows for theoretical approaches to be matched with concrete examples and to conduct a thorough analysis. This method is used as a research strategy to examine one or more phenomena in depth, to study the characteristics of each case and general patterns, as well as to evaluate all possible theoretical explanations [40, pp. 227-228].

The sources used in this research have been collected from a variety of official US federal websites that are involved in the implementation of US sanctions and foreign policy, including the White House, United States Congress, US Department of State, US embassies, US Department of the Treasury, and US Federal Register. All documents, speeches, statements, and press conferences describing the US foreign and

sanctions policy towards Latin America have been thoroughly analyzed. Additional information published by critical analytical centers, mass media, and other databases supplements such analysis.

US foreign policy towards Latin America. Latin America's place in US foreign policy is largely determined by the significance of the region for US national security interests [48]. The US National Security Strategy, released by J. Biden's administration in October 2022, defines Washington's regional priorities as expanding economic opportunities in the region, strengthening democracy, and building up its security [35, p. 41].

Researchers indicate that in the current administration's foreign policy narrative, the "defense of liberal democratic values" is closely related to the struggle against countries with "revisionist" [46, p. 105] foreign policy approaches that seek to establish an "illiberal model of the international order" [29, p. 403]. The list of such countries, according to the US narrative, primarily includes Russia and China [29, p. 403].

Among the main tasks identified in today's US foreign policy is to deter the growing potential of US rivals by limiting their dominance in key areas and regions [13]. Based on this, President J. Biden and his team (continuing the policy of the Obama administration) are building a binary view of modern international relations based on the constructed confrontation between "democracy and authoritarianism" [1]. Such an interpretation suggests that the United States embodies liberal democratic values and is on the "right side of history." This also implies that if any were to side with Russia or China, such a decision would be seen as a step towards supporting "authoritarianism" [29].

If to ideologically draw up a distinction between countries in Latin America, the United States defines Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as "undemocratic regimes" because "the popular will is suppressed" in these countries [35, p. 40]. Thus, it is natural that these countries remain the key targets of US sanctions in the region. At the same time, the Biden administration is trying to present a positive image of the United States to ordinary Latin American citizens. In January 2023, the American government expanded legal pathways for safe, orderly, and humane migration, including for individuals coming from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Cuba [9].

The National Security Strategy of 2022 also focuses on the fact that US sanctions and those of its allies aim to reduce the influence and military potential of Russia and China in the region. Military cooperation from a handful of Latin American countries with Russia is considered a threat [35, p. 22]. Such a motive [36] was the justification for imposing the sanctions on Nicaragua in October 2022. Despite the difficult socio-economic situation in many Latin American countries, especially those that have fallen under US sanctions, representatives of the current American administration are trying to promulgate the story that sanctions not only increase the level of democracy in the region but also improve the security of the United States itself: they strengthen US influence and control over the ongoing political and economic processes [56].

1. US sanctions policy against Cuba.

Cuba has been experiencing the consequences of US sanctions for over six decades, but its political environment still remains far from meeting US democratic ideals [27] (although during some periods we have seen a temporary softening in US sanctions policy against Cuba [18; 32]). Recently, Cuba-related sanctions were tightened under President Donald Trump in 2017. His administration canceled almost all previously made concessions [24]. In the same year, the US administration issued the National Security Presidential Memorandum [55] that imposed new sanctions, including restrictions on transactions with companies controlled by the Cuban military. The State Department published a list of entities controlled by the military, intelligence, or security services with which direct financial transactions would benefit those services or personnel disproportionately at the expense of the Cuban people or private enterprise. At that time, the so-called “Cuba Restricted List” included 231 organizations (including ministries, hotels, and businesses).

By 2019, the Trump administration had largely withdrawn concessions and greatly increased sanctions, especially on travel and remittances, placing pressure on Cuba for human rights violations and supporting the Venezuelan government of N. Maduro. At the end of Trump’s presidency on January 11, 2021, the State Department once again designated Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism [14; 61].

President J. Biden, who promised during his election campaign to cut back on the restrictive measures against Cuba, has yet to ease the sanctions [64]. Despite Biden’s rhetoric about revising bilateral relations, the United States has been consistently following a policy of tightening sanctions against Cuba since 2017. In its first few months in office, the Biden administration announced that it was reviewing Washington’s Cuban policy. In March 2021, the White House press secretary said that the administration will make “human rights a key element of policy” and will review policy decisions made by the previous administration, including the decision to designate Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism [41; 61].

Furthermore, after the Cuban government’s harsh response to the July 11, 2021, protests, President Biden and other officials expressed solidarity with the protesters and criticized the government’s “acts of repression” [54]. On July 30, 2021, an expansion of sanctions against Cuba was announced, with Biden noting that the United States will do everything possible to protect the “fundamental rights of the Cuban people” [52]. In August 2021, the Department of the Treasury imposed four rounds of targeted financial sanctions on Cuban security entities and “officials involved in actions to suppress the protests” [59].

In November 2021 and January 2022, the Department of State imposed visa restrictions on officials implicated in suppressing a planned civic march and those involved in the imprisonment of the July 11 protesters [4]. The US declared that such actions are aimed at “promoting accountability for Cuban officials who enable their government’s assaults on democracy and human rights” and “supporting greater freedom and economic opportunities for the Cuban people” [4]. According to the typical rhetoric of the American authorities, these sanctions were necessary for “holding the Cuban regime accountable” and to “stop repression upon the Cuban people for demanding freedom” [11].

According to the official US narrative, the political leadership in Cuba is nothing short of “authoritarian” [54]. The US administration is also very “concerned” that China allegedly has an intelligence center in Cuba and is seeking to further expand cooperation with Havana [42].

Generally, recent studies have been indicating growing US sanction ineffectiveness regarding the ability of the US to facilitate the

democratization of Cuba's political system. Additionally, other studies emphasize the negative effects of US sanctions on the human rights situation in the country [3, pp. 509-510]. Restrictions on Cuba's access to new technology and financial resources have led to a serious slowdown in the development of the country's healthcare, education, and research [2].

2. US sanctions policy against Venezuela.

Venezuelan sanctions are stated to be implemented for the "protection of human rights." The fight against the its "authoritarian regime" was justified by the US narrative that focused on the 2014 political repression in the country when the US Congress passed the Law on the Protection of Human Rights and Civil Society in Venezuela. The legislation obliges the President to impose sanctions on Venezuelan citizens who are considered to have committed violence, serious human rights abuses, or anti-democratic actions. US President Barack Obama imposed the first of these sanctions by Executive Order in March 2015 (Executive Order 13692).

At the beginning of his term, President Donald Trump further strengthened sanctions against the country [51]. In 2017, he issued a decree that cut off the Venezuelan government's access to US financial institutions [19]. Among the blocked organizations was the state gas and oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela (PdVSA)*. Operations in the oil sector are crucial to the Venezuelan economy, accounting for a quarter of the country's GDP and 99 percent of its export revenue [8]. After the 2018 Venezuelan elections, the Trump administration issued several new sanctions packages, aiming to further isolate Maduro and his allies from the international community [25]. These included sanctions on the purchase of Venezuelan debt and a ban on transactions involving Venezuelan digital currencies. Sanctions have also been imposed on the assets of any person who commits corrupt transactions with Maduro's government. At least 26 people were placed under these sanctions, including those who helped the Maduro regime evade oil sanctions.

In 2019, Trump's administration turned its attention to PdVSA. New sanctions were aimed at preventing Russia and China from receiving Venezuelan oil as part of a debt repayment program [15]. The Treasury has blocked all the

company's properties under US jurisdiction. As a rule, American companies and citizens were prohibited from dealing with PdVSA. Selected companies were allowed to maintain some limited operations. Also in 2019, the Ministry of Finance imposed sanctions against non-American companies that did business with PdVSA, including against Russian banks [63]. The following year, the Ministry of Finance began to impose sanctions against those who help in the export, production, or sale of Venezuelan oil. This included several Mexican firms [43].

In 2019, a series of anti-government protests broke out in Venezuela. At one of the rallies, J. Guaidy, the head of the National Assembly, proclaimed that he wanted to put an end to the usurpation of power and form a transitional government by holding fair elections. On January 23, 2019, Guaidy assumed the role of interim president of Venezuela, in accordance with the Constitution. On the same day, the State Department announced the recognition of Guaido as the legitimate head of state of Venezuela [45]. Following this event, the Trump administration further tightened its sanctions policy against Venezuela "in light of the continued usurpation of power by the illegitimate Maduro regime, as well as the regime's human rights abuses." Overall, President Trump signed seven decrees on Venezuelan sanctions. This included sanctions against state-owned or state-affiliated companies such as the *Minerven* gold mining firm, the army, the national police, the central bank, and logistics companies [63].

The US Congress contributed to these efforts by passing the bipartisan VERDAD Act (Venezuela Emergency Relief, Democracy Assistance, and Development Act) [49] in December 2019 to prevent the Maduro regime from accessing financial instruments, to cancel visa privileges for people who acted on behalf of Russia, to help the Venezuelan security forces, and to provide humanitarian aid to Venezuela [49].

The main US contradictions within its Venezuelan sanctions have been related to the violation of human rights in the country [62]. With various laws and executive orders passed, restrictions were imposed on the ownership of property and assets. The Biden administration, however, continued to maintain contact with Guaidó. The United States was even willing to

calibrate a new sanctions policy to help transfer power to him for “a peaceful restoration of democratic institutions, free and fair elections, and respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Venezuelans” [44]. However, sanctions have not weakened the position of the Maduro government; meanwhile, Guaidó has since fled to Colombia and then to the US [47].

Since the end of 2022, various changes in Washington’s sanctions regime against Caracas have been recorded [58]. After various negotiations, an agreement between Maduro’s government and the opposition on the 2024 elections was reached. Starting in November 2022, the United States began to reduce its sanctions pressure on the country. The US Treasury issued two general licenses that introduced some exceptions to the sanctions program: the American company Chevron received permission to engage in the limited extraction of natural resources in Venezuela; Halliburton, Schlumberger, Baker Hughes, and Weatherford were allowed to conduct operations related to the support of assets in Venezuela, including those related to PdVSA (whose license was renewed in May 2023).

On October 18, 2023, after the signing of a roadmap between the Maduro government and the opposition for the 2024 elections, the US announced a more widespread easing of sanctions. General License 44 lifted restrictions on work with the oil and gas sector in Venezuela for six months, and General License 43 introduced similar relief for the Minerven gold mining company [58]. However, the easing of US restrictive measures against Venezuela occurred at a time of increased fuel prices and inflation in the United States. Additionally, the global political and economic situation became more complex and tense, particularly with rising energy prices worldwide [65].

Most researchers consider the Venezuela case one of the clearest examples of authoritarian tendencies being strengthened even under the influence of US sanctions [21, p. 1]. Albeit, at the highest level, it is declared that “it is in the national interest of the United States for Venezuela to prosper as a nation while seeking to pursue policies supported by its people through a stable democratic process” [57]. The American administration considers the government in Venezuela illegitimate and calls people to protest,

resorting to the explanation that “Venezuelans deserve the right to choose their representatives through free and fair elections and to trust that their elected leaders will uphold their basic responsibility to respect universal human rights” [57].

The United States, together with its allies, is implementing a policy of forcing democratic transformations through sanctions and support for the opposition. In turn, Russia and China seek to develop cooperation with the current Maduro government. Moreover, like in the Cuban case, sanctions have seriously affected the human rights situation in the country and have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis [22].

3. US sanctions policy against Nicaragua.

President R. Reagan invoked the IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act) to impose a comprehensive embargo against Nicaragua in 1985, confronting the Sandinista government [28, p. 46]. Nevertheless, only in 2018 did Washington first impose sanctions on Nicaraguan citizens personally amid country-wide protests over social security system reforms.

After the protests of 2018, the US decided to work towards the democratization of Nicaragua via sanctions. The Treasury was allowed to impose sanctions on any person involved in human rights violations or corruption in Nicaragua [12]. Since 2018, the United States has gradually added individuals and Nicaraguan companies to the list of persons subject to sanctions. This includes members of the Ortega family and their inner circle [5].

Starting in April 2018, groups of Nicaraguans took to the streets, evolving to become a more general protest against President Ortega [39]. In November 2018, President D. Trump issued his first executive order against Nicaragua, according to which several people from Ortega’s entourage, including Vice President and First Lady R. Murillo, as well as the Chief of Police, were identified as Specially Designated Nationals, or SDN [34]. Any designation on the SDN list implies an asset freeze and travel ban. Moreover, US citizens are prohibited from making transactions with those included on the SDN list. A month later, the US Congress passed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Act (NICA) [26].

In November 2021, Ortega won a fourth consecutive term in the presidential elections, which were sharply criticized by US officials who

made accusations of vote-rigging [37]. In a statement, President Biden called the elections a “sham” and said that Ortega and Murillo “rule Nicaragua as autocrats” [53]. The US and its allies imposed sanctions on individuals throughout the Nicaraguan government, including the Ministry of Defense and one telecommunications agency of the country. The United States also imposed a travel ban on 116 people [30].

Congress passed the bipartisan Reinforcing Nicaragua’s Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act (RENACER) a few days after the 2021 Nicaraguan presidential election [50]. The Act called on the President to introduce numerous sanctions against persons obstructing the establishment of conditions necessary for free elections. Additionally, the bill required the Department of State to report on “Russian activities in Nicaragua, including cooperation between Russian and Nicaraguan military personnel and intelligence services” [50].

On November 16, 2021, a proclamation on the introduction of new sanctions against the government of Nicaragua was issued. The motivation and goal of the new restrictive measures highlighted the need “to promote democratic processes and institutions” [6]. In October 2022, new US sanctions against Nicaragua were justified by the fact that “the Ortega-Murillo regime expanded its cooperation with Moscow by allowing the continued presence of Russian military personnel and equipment in the country” [10]. President Biden signed Executive Order 13851 (Blocking Property of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Nicaragua) to “expand the authorities available to increase targeted pressure on the Ortega-Murillo regime” [17]. This measure, according to US authorities, gave the administration additional means “to target the regime while allowing the flexibility necessary to continue to support the people of Nicaragua” [10].

On April 19, 2023, OFAC designated three Nicaraguan judicial officials, who, according to the US, were “involved in human rights abuses conducted by the regime of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and the broader oppression of Nicaraguan citizens who oppose his government” [60]. In August 2023, the US State Department imposed visa restrictions on 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials accused of

“participating in human rights violations for their roles in the closure of a popular university and jailing of a prominent bishop” (the government imprisoned Bishop R. Alvarez in 2022, a critic of President Ortega) [35].

The United States uses Nicaragua’s ties with Russia and China to emphasize the undemocratic nature of the ruling regime, calling it “authoritarian” and “destabilizing” for the region. Sanctions continue to be expanded, described as “tools to hold the Ortega-Murillo regime accountable for its escalating human rights violations, continued dismantling of democratic institutions, attacks on civil society, and increasing security cooperation with Russia” [10].

All in all, the United States considers sanctions against Nicaragua insufficient to promote changes in the internal policy of the country. During a March 2023 House Foreign Affairs joint subcommittee meeting on the human rights situation in Nicaragua, some members called for additional pressure measures. Financial restrictions against the Central American Bank for Economic Integration were proposed, which has lent nearly \$3.5 billion to the Ortega administration in the last five years [36].

Results. The US foreign policy narrative is structured in a sophisticated way to avoid recognizing the eroding US hegemony in Latin America. At the same time, the issues of liberal-democratic development in Latin American countries are fundamental for the United States and are inherent to its sanctions rhetoric. Thus, the threat to the US and the region emanating from Russia, China, and other so-called “authoritarian” states is described from this particular point of view.

Under President Biden, promoting liberal democratic values has become one of the central themes of the administration’s foreign policy narrative, including in Latin America. International relations are mostly described by US officials as the global rivalry between “democracy” and “autocracy.” Therefore, the US claims that its motives are “protection of human rights and democracy” to simply justify the implementation of sanctions against numerous Latin American countries.

Despite the grandiloquent rhetoric expressed in official US speeches, the cases of US sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua reveal

the ineffectiveness of the sanctions in achieving the expressed goals. After all, Washington's foreign policy aims of democratization, promoting liberal values, and protecting human rights are largely far from being achieved. However, it should be noted that some changes have indeed taken place after the imposition of US sanctions. For example, Cuba's national economy experienced some liberalization in certain sectors, and there have been important and ongoing negotiations between Maduro's government and the opposition about future elections in Venezuela. The overarching trend tied to sanctions is strengthened sanction resistance by the political regimes and further regime consolidation, despite the serious social and economic deterioration in the countries under consideration. In this context, this study largely confirms the theoretical conclusions drawn by various other authors: sanctions, in most cases, lead to an increase in authoritarian tendencies within the target countries. The study also confirms R. Pape's argument on how sanctions that are aimed at changing political regimes prove to be the least effective types of sanctions.

Keeping in mind the nature of great power rivalry, it should be noted that Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are all striving to develop cooperation with the key US competitors in the region – Russia and China. They are becoming their most important political, military, and economic partners. The US narrative defines Moscow and Beijing as the most active representatives of “illiberal regimes” seeking to rethink the US-centered “liberal rules-based world order.” The three Latin American countries considered in this study are also developing ties with other countries that have been labeled as “illiberal regimes” in official US discourse, particularly Iran and North Korea. Additionally, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are trying to build institutional cooperation mechanisms and develop multilateral regional interaction, but without the participation of the United States (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)). This allows them to promote an alternative, non-American, regional agenda and reduce the political and economic costs of US restrictive measures by diversifying state ties.

Unequivocal evidence of the ineffectiveness of US sanctions in terms of democratization

processes lies in the arguments put forth by the incumbent administration: unilateral sanctions have yet to lead to a successful democratic transition in targeted countries around the world. In this regard, Biden's administration seeks to transform its US sanctions policy towards greater multilateralism, consolidating efforts with American allies on the basis of sanction coalitions. This has already contributed to greater US and EU sanctions policy coordination, as proven by the measures taken against Russia after February 2022. Additionally, these new coalitions introduce greater implications for anti-China sanctions policies as well.

NOTE

¹ The research was supported by RSF (project No. 22-78-10014, <https://rscf.ru/project/22-78-10014/>)

Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда № 22-78-10014, <https://rscf.ru/project/22-78-10014/>

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