

# ★ RUSSIA'S ★ STRATEGIC FOOTPRINT IN NICARAGUA:

SOFT, SHARP, AND HARD INFLUENCE  
UNDER DANIEL ORTEGA

APRIL 2026





**Expediente Abierto** mission is to produce and disseminate high-quality research and journalistic content that strengthens critical analysis, civic engagement, and the defense of democracy in Central America..

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the expanding bilateral relationship between Nicaragua and Russia between 2008 and 2025, a particularly revealing case in the Western Hemisphere. The evidence indicates that this relationship has developed steadily, albeit with relatively limited scope, and has been strongly supported by political, cultural, and informational narratives since Daniel Ortega (FSLN) returned to power in 2007.

The analysis draws on economic data related to Russia–Nicaragua relations and, primarily, on an original dataset manually compiled by Expediente Abierto (EA). This dataset is based on a systematic review of articles published between January 2008 and December 2025 in *El 19 Digital*, a media outlet controlled by the Ortega-Murillo family and explicitly aligned with the Sandinista government’s agenda. Using a conceptual framework grounded in *soft power*, *hard power*, and *sharp power* (Nye, 2004), the dataset records 411 events, which were subsequently coded to identify the predominant mode of influence, date, sector, and actors involved. This methodology enabled an empirical assessment of patterns and strategies underpinning Russian influence in Nicaragua.

Findings show that the majority of recorded events correspond to *soft power*, with 335 observations. This suggests that Russia has prioritized mechanisms of attraction and cultural legitimation as its primary means of consolidating its presence in Nicaragua and, through it, in the broader region. This strategy reflects both material constraints, as Russia’s capabilities have been affected by international sanctions stemming from the conflict in Ukraine, and a long-term strategic approach aimed at shaping influence through cultural, educational, and religious networks. *Hard power* manifestations account for 53 cases, primarily involving military cooperation, police training, and strategic infrastructure. Meanwhile, *sharp power* expressions represent 23 events linked to narrative projection and information control within Nicaragua’s media system. Although less frequent, these forms of power remain integral components of Russia’s

broader strategy and reinforce its structural presence in key areas of the Nicaraguan state.

The data also reveal a clear asymmetry in the bilateral relationship. Russia operates as a provider of legitimacy, technical resources, and diplomatic support to the Ortega government, particularly following the intensification of authoritarian practices after the 2018 protests. Nicaragua, in turn, adopts a position of strategic alignment that, while offering short-term benefits, raises concerns regarding potential geopolitical subordination, the contraction of civic space within Nicaraguan civil society, and the instrumentalization of culture and information as tools of symbolic control. This asymmetry extends to the economic sphere, where the relationship remains limited, intermittent, and structurally shallow.

These findings should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The study relies on publicly available sources and therefore does not incorporate classified, informal, or unpublished information, which may result in the underreporting of events in sensitive areas such as security, intelligence, or diplomatic negotiations. Additionally, the manual coding of events involves analytical judgments that may introduce some degree of interpretive variability. These limitations, however, do not undermine the internal coherence of the analysis, which is designed to identify patterns and strategies of influence projection rather than to exhaustively document all bilateral interactions.

Based on these findings, Expediente Abierto identifies three priority lines of action. First, it is necessary to strengthen state and regional capacities for assessing geopolitical risk in order to anticipate strategic dynamics in key sectors and counter existing Russian influence in Nicaragua. Second, independent observatories within academia and civil society should be consolidated to systematize information and ensure continuous monitoring of Russian influence in Nicaragua, as well as that of other extra-regional powers. Third, clear and timely communication strategies must be developed to counter biased narratives and enhance the capacity to respond to risks associated with Russia's presence in the region.

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## FOREWORD

### **Russia in Latin America: A Challenge for Security and Democracy in the Western Hemisphere**

After several days of traveling through migrant shelters in the states of Coahuila de Zaragoza and Monterrey, and after repeatedly asking those staying in these charitable facilities in northern Mexico who awaited their opportunity to enter the United States, the Nicaraguan Fernando finally appeared. Young, well-presented, and articulate, as expected from a university student, this young man, who had fled repression in his country and never wanted to reveal his real name, provided the testimony I was seeking to demonstrate with solid evidence what was taking place in Central America at that pivotal moment in 2024, with the support of Daniel Ortega and the probable backing of Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Fernando explained how another migrant from India, whom he had met while crossing Guatemala on his way to the US border, described in broken Spanish his journey from his country of origin to that part of the Central American jungle: he had flown to the Dominican Republic and from there crossed the Caribbean Sea aboard a patrol boat of the Nicaraguan Navy that disembarked him at the port of Bluefields, already in Nicaragua. Local police agents monitored the entire route, for which he paid 800 dollars. Authorities in Managua had turned their country into a hub for migrants from Asia and the Middle East seeking to enter the United States illegally, generating destabilization and polarization in US public opinion just months before the presidential elections that returned Donald Trump to the White House.

Fernando's testimony left no doubt about the Nicaraguan state's complicity in that human trafficking operation, which closely resembled events in Europe, specifically in Belarus in 2021, just months before the start of the war in Ukraine. Comparisons quickly emerged: both Belarus and Nicaragua are allied with Vladimir Putin's Russia, with a strong presence of Russian security "advisers" on their territory. Inciting flows of irregular migration constitutes a destabilizing lever

that the Kremlin has repeatedly used in recent years, aware that it represents one of the most divisive and polarizing issues generating debate in the Western bloc it confronts, both in Europe and in the United States. The conclusion follows: indirectly, Putin's Russia interfered in US political life by exporting instability through one of its main allies in Central America.

This report, produced by the Expediente Abierto team, finally clarifies one of the least covered issues in international media, including US outlets, despite its critical importance for the country: the assertive presence of the Kremlin in Latin America, particularly in Nicaragua. As the following pages detail, this does not represent a repetition of Cold War dynamics of the twentieth century. Russia, lacking the resources of the Soviet Union, invests little in Nicaragua and does not build a genuine economic partnership with the Central American country, unlike the Soviet Union once did with Cuba and other states in the region. Instead, it has constructed a form of "low-cost" association, based primarily on propaganda and cooperation between security forces, generating mutual benefits for autocratic elites in both countries while doing nothing to improve conditions for their populations. Managua secures regime continuity, while Moscow projects power and influence in the region, thousands of kilometers from its borders, using Nicaraguan territory as a platform.

Understanding how this influence operates within the country is essential for designing strategies to limit its impact on neighboring countries and, ultimately, to enable Nicaraguans to recover the democracy lost under Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. Developments in Nicaragua in recent years, as described in the following pages, are concerning and should raise alarms, as they closely align with strategies Russia has employed in other regions it has influenced, particularly in West Africa, turning countries into subordinate states aligned with Kremlin geopolitical interests.

The methods used in Africa and Latin America are nearly identical. They rely on building powerful propaganda apparatuses that neutralize criticism, dissenting voices, and independent journalism; they operate through the formation of an extractive and complacent elite or oligarchy that concentrates productive resources

and uses them for enrichment, in some cases forming family dynasties that perpetuate power. Institutions that ensure the separation of powers become neutralized and filled with loyalists. State security forces transform into praetorian guards whose function is not to ensure national protection or institutional functioning, but to secure the position of those who hold power illegitimately. This is not primarily ideological, as was the case with Soviet involvement in Central America during the Cold War. What matters is the regime's illiberal and autocratic nature. In this renewed geopolitical contest, Moscow has built alliances not only with Cuba under Díaz-Canel and Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro, but also with El Salvador under Nayib Bukele.

In this context, the following pages represent a valuable resource for journalists monitoring developments related to Russia, both in Europe and across the Americas. As Manuel Orozco, director of Migration, Remittances, and Development at the Inter-American Dialogue, notes, “methods and sources of support” may differ across the Atlantic, but “the objective of maintaining power through force and absolute control of authority is identical.”

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Foreword written by **Marc Marginedas**, war correspondent and investigative journalist specializing in former USSR affairs in the International section of *El Periódico*.

# INTRODUCTION

In an international context shaped by great power competition, Latin America has emerged as a key region for the projection of influence by extra-regional actors. Within this setting, Russia's presence in Nicaragua constitutes a relevant case, both due to the historical trajectory of the relationship and the political and informational power strategies it has deployed. Unlike other bilateral relationships in the region, these strategies have prioritized media penetration, the manipulation of narratives, and indirect support for local political actors, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies, such as Daniel Ortega.

The distinctiveness of this case cannot be understood without considering the historical antecedents that structured this relationship. These date back to the Cold War period, when Russia was part of the former Soviet Union and international politics was shaped by ideological rivalries and disputes over spheres of influence. Although Nicaragua and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations in 1944,<sup>1</sup> it was the triumph of the Sandinista Popular Revolution in 1979 that gave rise to a strategic relationship. In response to the escalation of internal conflict with the Contra and pressure from the United States, the leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) sought political, economic, and military support from Moscow<sup>2</sup>. In turn, the Soviet Union viewed Nicaragua as a key platform for projecting its influence in Central America and countering the presence of the United States, driven by both geopolitical and ideological considerations (Medina, 2022; Baranov, 2023).

Between 1979 and 1990, cooperation consolidated progressively as Nicaragua integrated into the socialist bloc, eventually becoming the second most significant strategic ally of the Soviet Union in Latin America, after Cuba. During that decade, Moscow provided economic assistance, credits, subsidies, and extensive arms

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<sup>1</sup> Despite limited formal ties, academic and cultural exchanges persisted, including Carlos Fonseca's participation in the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957 (Embassy of Russia, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> In March 1980, a delegation led by Henry Ruiz, Humberto Ortega, and Tomás Borge traveled to Moscow to request economic and military assistance and signed a protocol comprising eight agreements, including a framework for relations between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Nicaragua's FSLN (Medina, 2022).

supplies, as well as military training and technical support for the organization of the Sandinista Popular Army<sup>3</sup>. It also contributed energy resources and technical expertise that strengthened the country's infrastructure and state capacities (EFE, 2024; Berríos, 1985; Ferrero, 2015). This cooperation left a lasting imprint on Nicaragua by reinforcing state structures linked to defense and public administration, shaping the political culture of Sandinismo, and consolidating Russia's image as a historical ally in contrast to the United States (Medina, 2022; Orozco, 2024).

Following the rupture of the 1990s, marked by the electoral defeat of the FSLN, the cooling of ties with Moscow, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bilateral relationship receded and lacked a clear strategic agenda. The return of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to power in 2007 marked a new phase, coinciding with Russia's efforts to reassert its international presence under Vladimir Putin. In this context, Nicaragua once again became a close political partner. This shift enabled the reactivation of historical ties and the expansion of bilateral cooperation beyond the Cold War legacy. Since 2008, this reengagement has translated into a sustained Russian presence in the country, reflected in agreements on technical cooperation, security, and defense.

As the data in this study show, between 2009 and 2012, cooperation expanded through donations, infrastructure projects, and assistance in public security, including police training and the provision of equipment<sup>4</sup>. In subsequent years, cooperation extended to the defense sector and the strengthening of state capacities, including the inauguration in 2013 of the Marshal Zhukov Training Center for the instruction of Nicaraguan officers with Russian support, as well as the establishment of a topographic center linked to the GLONASS satellite system, reflecting deeper cooperation in security and defense (Ghotme, 2015; Santos, 2025).

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<sup>3</sup> Nicaragua's Armed Forces were established on September 2, 1979, replacing the National Guard. They initially operated as the Sandinista Popular Army and, since 1995, as the Nicaraguan Army.

<sup>4</sup> Between 2000 and 2023, Nicaragua allocated approximately USD 192 million to the acquisition of Russian military equipment, of which USD 134 million was concentrated in the period between 2007 and 2023 (Orozco, 2024).

On this basis, the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West beginning in 2014 introduced a new framework for the bilateral relationship. Since then, Nicaragua has consolidated its role as a consistent and reliable political ally of Moscow in Latin America, systematically supporting its positions in multilateral forums (Meléndez, 2023). This alignment has translated into explicit support for key decisions in Russian foreign policy, particularly since 2022, including the recognition of the annexation of Ukrainian territories, in a context of growing international isolation of the Kremlin that has reinforced the political dimension of the relationship.

In the military domain, cooperation has advanced gradually toward greater institutionalization, becoming an important component of the bilateral relationship. Between 2015 and 2024, contacts between the armed forces intensified, including exchanges of experience, training programs, and the participation of Nicaraguan personnel as observers in activities conducted in Russia. These dynamics laid the groundwork for a more formalized relationship, exemplified by the military cooperation agreement signed in 2022<sup>5</sup>. Within this framework, by 2024 negotiations began on a military cooperation agreement aimed at permanently structuring collaboration between both armed forces, a process that culminated in its formalization in October 2025. As a result, stable channels of coordination, training, and “mutual trust” in security and defense were consolidated to address common threats at both regional and global levels (EFE, 2025; Alba, 2025; Forbes, 2025).

In 2026, the relationship between Russia and Nicaragua rests on a strategic convergence based on mutual interests and current geopolitical conditions. For Russia, Nicaragua functions as a platform for political and symbolic presence in Central America, as well as an ally willing to support its international narrative and serve as a counterbalance in the region vis-à-vis the United States. For Daniel Ortega’s government, the relationship provides political backing in a context of international isolation, security cooperation to sustain internal control, and

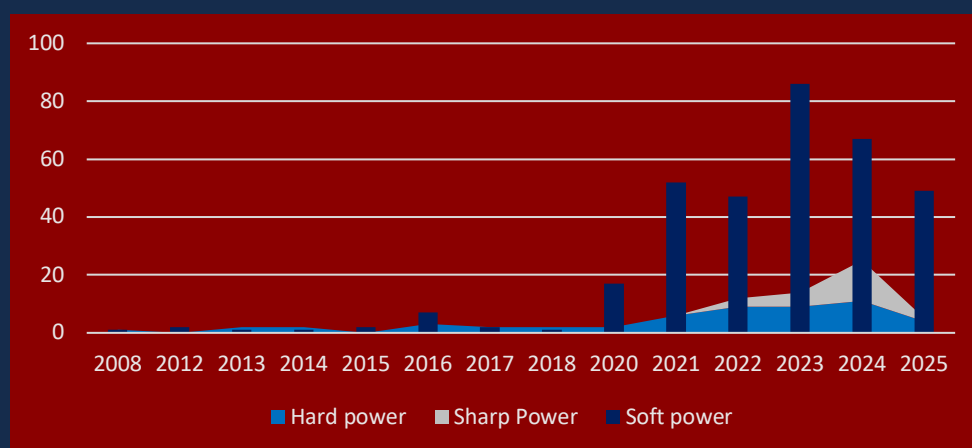
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<sup>5</sup> This agreement authorized the temporary entry of Russian troops, vessels, and aircraft into Nicaragua under the justification of “humanitarian operations and counternarcotics efforts,” allowing for the periodic rotation of Russian military contingents and consolidating Nicaragua’s position as Moscow’s primary logistical foothold in the region (Santos, 2025).

external legitimation. This convergence has consolidated a relationship that, while not reaching levels of economic dependency, carries significant strategic and political value for both countries and represents a challenge to institutional resilience in the region.

From a temporal perspective, the evolution of the relationship described above is reflected empirically in the data presented in *Figure 1*. Throughout the period analyzed, Expediente Abierto observed a progressive intensification of Russian influence events associated with different modalities of power projection. In an initial phase, interactions remained relatively limited and responded to the reestablishment of ties following Daniel Ortega's return to power. Beginning in the 2020s, and with greater intensity since 2022, the diversification and expansion of influence instruments have been linked to a more conflictive international environment shaped by the war in Ukraine and the search for political support. In this context, non-coercive strategies associated with *soft power* have gained increasing prominence, while other forms of influence, including *hard power* and *sharp power*, have emerged in complementary ways as part of an adaptive response to an increasingly polarized global environment.

**CHART #1. FORMS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN NICARAGUA (2008 - 2025)**



Source:

Author's elaboration based on the Russian Influence in Nicaragua database.

Building on this historical evolution, the report adopts an analytical approach that disaggregates the different dimensions of the bilateral relationship. To assess Russian influence in Nicaragua, it first examines the mechanisms of economic engagement, including bilateral trade, financial cooperation, and investment, in order to evaluate the scale and nature of the economic relationship. This section draws on secondary data sources, including those from the World Bank. The analysis then turns to political and informational power strategies through the concepts of *soft power*, *hard power*, and *sharp power*, which served as the analytical categories for constructing the original dataset of Russian influence events. This dataset was manually compiled through the systematic identification, collection, and coding of content from pro-government media outlets (*El 19 Digital*) and other sources aligned with Daniel Ortega's government. This integrated approach makes it possible to understand how economic and communicational dimensions intersect within a broader strategy of influence. The analysis provides a comprehensive overview of how Russia shapes governance, sovereignty, and strategic alignments in Nicaragua, while also highlighting how Daniel Ortega's government facilitates these mechanisms in order to mobilize resources that reinforce its presence in the region.



## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical approach used to analyze Russian influence in Nicaragua draws on the concepts of *soft power*, *hard power*, and *sharp power*, which make it possible to capture the different forms of influence exerted by Russia. Each of these forms reflects distinct yet interconnected strategies of influence projection and structural presence in Nicaragua. They do not operate in isolation or in a linear manner. Rather, they often converge in hybrid strategies where security objectives, cultural legitimization, and informational positioning overlap in Russia's engagement in Central America.

*Soft power*, as defined by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others without resorting to coercion, through cultural attraction, shared values, and public diplomacy. This form of power relies on the construction of legitimacy and credibility and is effective when a country's values and actions are perceived as coherent and recognized by others (Cooper, 2004). The literature emphasizes that *soft power* operates indirectly and over the long term and does not constitute a fully controllable resource nor one that automatically translates into concrete political outcomes. Its nature is fundamentally relational and contextual, as attraction emerges from the interaction between the actor projecting influence and those receiving it. In this sense, *soft power* should be understood as a structural component of power in the international system, complementary to material power rather than a mere tool of communication or propaganda.

INFOGRAPHIC #1

# RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN NICARAGUA

## CONCEPTUAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

### NATURE OF THE STRATEGY

Forms of Russian influence do not operate in isolation. They converge in hybrid strategies where security objectives, cultural legitimization, and informational positioning overlap. They serve both Moscow's global strategy and the authoritarian consolidation of the Ortega regime.

#### SOFT POWER

Ability to influence through cultural attraction, values, and public diplomacy without coercion. It is indirect, relational, and long-term.



#### APPLICATION IN NICARAGUA:

- Promotion of the Russian language and academic scholarships.
- Cultural management and engagement.
- Mainly targeted at youth and sectors aligned with Sandinismo.

#### SHARP POWER

"Piercing" power that penetrates political environments. Use of disinformation and propaganda to distort perceptions and manipulate narratives.



#### APPLICATION IN NICARAGUA:

- State media (RT, Sputnik) amplified by local outlets (El 19 Digital, Canal 4).
- Anti-Western and pro-Kremlin narratives.
- Rhetorical defense of a multipolar world and sovereignty.

#### HARD POWER

Capacity for coercion through economic and military resources. Use of tangible incentives and threats to ensure alignment.



#### APPLICATION IN NICARAGUA:

- Police and military training (doctrine and tactics).
- Cooperation in cybersecurity and strategic intelligence.
- Surveillance.
- Coercive support for regime consolidation.

In contrast to this logic of attraction, *sharp power*, conceptualized by Walker and Ludwig (2017), refers to forms of influence that operate at the intersection of soft and hard power through mechanisms such as propaganda, disinformation, and control of information flows. It is characterized by exploiting vulnerabilities in institutions, media systems, and civil society in other countries with the aim of distorting perceptions and manipulating narratives to weaken independent decision-making. This concept emerged as an analytical framework to account for strategies deployed by states such as China and Russia, which seek to project influence through media, culture, think tanks, and academia beyond persuasion or attraction. Instead, these strategies follow a logic of penetration aimed at “piercing” political and informational environments in areas of geopolitical interest (Gonzalez, 2023).

These forms are complemented by more traditional modalities of state power. *Hard power* refers to a state’s capacity to achieve its objectives by imposing its will on others through the use of economic and military resources. It operates through mechanisms such as military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions, relying on tangible resources such as armed forces and economic capacity to secure compliance or alignment from other states (Wilson, 2008; Wagner, 2014). As Nye (2009) argues, this form of power is exercised through explicit incentives and threats and remains a central component of international projection, even when combined with softer or informational strategies.

From this theoretical perspective, analyzing Russia’s presence in Nicaragua is particularly relevant, as the country has become a setting where these different modalities of power coexist and reinforce one another. Nicaragua stands out for its political proximity to Moscow and provides an institutional and political environment that facilitates the articulation of strategies aligned both with Russia’s interests and with the objectives of Daniel Ortega’s government in consolidating authoritarian control and seeking external legitimacy. The relationship also supports Russia’s broader goal of establishing enclaves of influence in Latin America as part of its global repositioning strategy vis-à-vis the West.

Accordingly, *hard power* is manifested through the deployment of military, political, and economic capabilities aimed at securing Russia's presence in the region and reinforcing the coercive capacity of Daniel Ortega's government in its process of authoritarian consolidation. Cooperation in security and defense has been particularly significant. Nicaragua has received police and military training from Russian instructors, signed cybersecurity cooperation agreements, and renewed treaties on strategic intelligence sharing. In addition, joint operations have been recorded in areas such as maritime surveillance and aerial patrol, along with the delivery of military equipment and technical assistance for maintaining defense systems acquired in previous years. These actions reflect Russia's intent to maintain a foothold in the Western Hemisphere, while for the Nicaraguan government the relationship represents a key source of support in the face of potential external or internal pressures.

By contrast, Russian *soft power* in Nicaragua has taken more subtle but equally effective forms, including the promotion of the Russian language in educational institutions, cultural exchanges organized by the Russian House in Managua, academic cooperation through university scholarships for Nicaraguan students in Moscow, and engagement with aligned religious institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church. Additionally, the funding of sports and cultural events, along with support for youth and student organizations, has created a sustained framework of symbolic legitimation aimed at fostering ideological affinity with sectors aligned with Sandinismo. While less visible than military cooperation, these interactions are likely to produce long-term effects by shaping perceptions, cultivating elites, and consolidating intergenerational ties with Russia's cultural apparatus.

*Sharp power* has been particularly relevant in shaping geopolitical narratives favorable to Moscow and hostile to the West. A key example is the sustained presence of media outlets such as Sputnik and RT en Español, whose content and narratives are regularly reproduced by official Nicaraguan media, including *El 19 Digital* and Canal 4. These platforms legitimize Kremlin actions in international conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and portray Russia as a reliable partner committed to non-interference, in contrast to the "imperialist aggressiveness" attributed to the United States and Europe. The circulation of these narratives

reinforces the discursive strategy of Daniel Ortega's government, which presents itself as a victim of international media encirclement and as a defender of an alternative multipolar order.

The interaction among these forms of power is channeled through specific political and institutional operators within Daniel Ortega's government, as illustrated in *Figure 3*. Within this structure, figures such as Laureano Ortega Murillo<sup>6</sup> have played a central role as strategic intermediaries in relations with Moscow. Through his role, economic, diplomatic, and symbolic linkages have been articulated, reinforcing Russia's insertion in Nicaragua. At the same time, institutions such as Nicaragua's Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>7</sup> have functioned as key nodes for formalizing bilateral agreements on cooperation, security, and diplomatic alignment. Regional platforms such as PARLACEN have been used to amplify political positions favorable to Russia. This institutional architecture, together with key actors within the Sandinista government, enables Russian *hard power* to reinforce the state's coercive capacities, *sharp power* to embed itself within an increasingly controlled media ecosystem, and *soft power* to operate as a mechanism of symbolic validation. These interactions collectively create a conducive environment for the consolidation of authoritarian rule under Ortega.

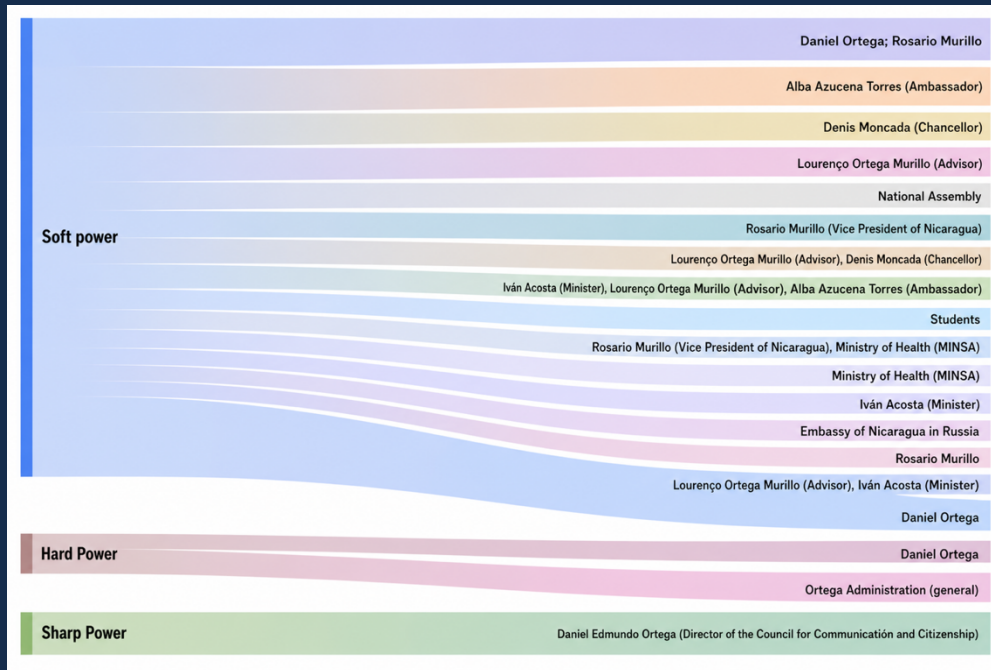
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<sup>6</sup> Laureano Ortega Murillo, son of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, serves as Presidential Advisor for Investment, Trade, and International Cooperation and as the Special Representative of the President of Nicaragua for Affairs with Russia.

<sup>7</sup> During an official ceremony honoring Russian Ambassador Alexander Khokhólikov, Nicaragua's Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that the country is working alongside Russia to build a new world order. See <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/canciller-de-nicaragua-dice-que-trabajan-de-la-mano-con-rusia-por-un-nuevo-orden-mundial/87680666>

**CHART #2.**

**NETWORK OF RELEVANT ACTORS BY TYPE OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE.  
MULTIPLE COMBINATIONS (2008–2025)**



Source:

Author's elaboration based on the Russian Influence in Nicaragua database.

## ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

Economic interaction between Nicaragua and Russia has taken place within a framework of limited ties that have developed unevenly over time. Bilateral trade, investment, and cooperation mechanisms have followed distinct trajectories, without generating a deeper relationship or a significant economic impact. The following section examines these dynamics based on trade patterns and the main flows of investment and cooperation between both countries.

### *Trade between Nicaragua and Russia*

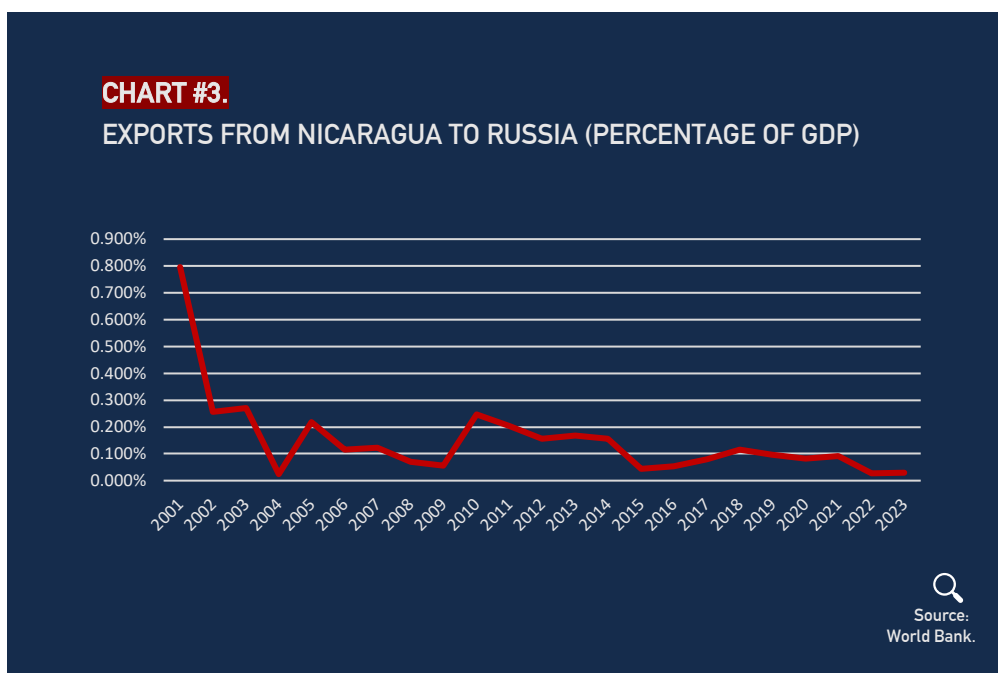
The trade relationship between Nicaragua and Russia has historically been asymmetric, with imports consistently exceeding exports<sup>8</sup>. During the 2000s, the trade deficit persisted, with the exception of a temporary surplus in 2001 equivalent to 0.498 percent of GDP. The largest deficits occurred between 2004 and 2006, ranging from -0.204 percent to -0.369 percent of GDP, driven by increased imports of Russian metals, construction materials, machinery, and electronics, reflecting a clear trade imbalance. This negative trend continued in subsequent years, reaching one of its highest levels in 2013 at -0.672 percent of GDP and remaining negative between 2016 and 2023, with deficits ranging from -0.3 percent to -0.562 percent of GDP.

In this context, exports to Russia have shown lower resilience to changes in the international environment and domestic conditions in Nicaragua, as illustrated in *Figure 3*. In 2001, exports to Russia accounted for 8.00 percent of total exports (0.796 percent of GDP), but declined rapidly in the following years, reaching lows of 0.18 percent in 2004 (0.024 percent of GDP) and 0.24 percent in 2008 (0.071

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<sup>8</sup> Overall, Nicaragua's external trade is characterized by a persistent trade deficit, associated with a high dependence on imports and an export structure concentrated in low value-added goods. This dynamic is replicated in the trade relationship with Russia, where the balance remains consistently skewed in Moscow's favor, driven by the greater weight of imports relative to exports that remain limited in scale and with constrained growth potential.

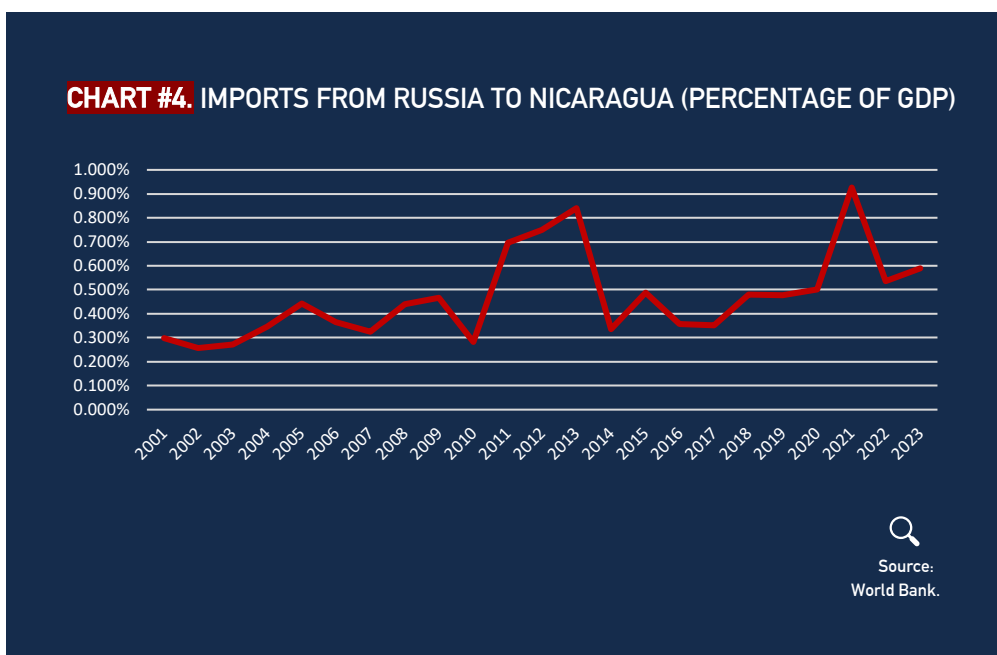
percent of GDP). A modest peak occurred in 2005, when 1.60 percent of Nicaraguan exports were directed to Russia (0.219 percent of GDP). Between 2010 and 2015, exports fluctuated between 0.12 percent and 1.17 percent of total exports, before declining again after 2015 to 0.06 percent in 2022 (0.027 percent of GDP). The most recent data for 2023 show a slight recovery, with exports reaching 0.07 percent of total exports (0.029 percent of GDP), although still well below the levels observed in the early 2000s.



In nominal terms, between 2002 and 2023, exports to Russia reached only USD 5.17 million in 2023, well below the peak recorded in 2010 (USD 21.71 million) and the level observed in 2002 (USD 13.36 million). This export basket has been primarily concentrated in agri-food products, including beef, sugar, coffee, and some dairy products, mostly managed by local agribusiness firms such as Nuevo Carnic, among others. However, no sustained value chains have emerged, nor have significant Russian investments materialized in these sectors. The data reveal a clear pattern of structural dependence on a single sector and a lack of sufficient diversification to sustain a deeper export relationship.

By contrast, Nicaraguan imports from Russia have shown gradual growth, with periods of stability and a relatively limited share of total imports. Between 2002 and 2023, imports increased from USD 13.42 million to USD 105.30 million,

highlighting a clear asymmetry in the trade relationship relative to exports. In the early 2000s, imports remained at modest levels, accounting for between 0.75 and 0.90 percent of total imports. Starting in 2004, however, they began to expand gradually, reaching 1.10 percent in 2005, with a contribution to GDP of 0.443 percent. Between 2016 and 2023, imports fluctuated between 0.6 percent and 1.3 percent of total imports, with a GDP contribution ranging from 0.35 to 0.93 percent.



In sectoral terms, imports from Russia have been concentrated primarily in metals and construction materials, mineral and chemical products, and machinery and electronics. These categories have gained sustained relevance, particularly as inputs for construction, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. By contrast, agricultural and food products from Russia have had only a marginal share in total imports, as have categories such as Arms and Ammunition, whose presence was limited and volatile before disappearing after 2013. This sectoral concentration has been accompanied by the predominant participation of state-owned or semi-state enterprises specializing in heavy industry. In particular, companies such as Severstal (steel), Rusal (aluminum), and Uralchem or PhosAgro (fertilizers and chemical products) have played a relevant role in supplying basic materials. In machinery, firms such as Rostselmash (agricultural equipment) and providers of energy systems have maintained a smaller but strategic presence.

### ***Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Russian Cooperation in Nicaragua***

Russian FDI in Nicaragua has been channeled primarily through bilateral cooperation mechanisms and relatively low-volume state donations, rather than through direct private investment<sup>9</sup>. Between 2007 and 2023, official Russian cooperation, including grants and loans, amounted to USD 167.76 million, representing only 1.49 percent of the total external resources received by Nicaragua during that period. Most of these funds consisted of grants totaling USD 149.87 million, equivalent to 4.79 percent of total external contributions, allocated to eight projects implemented between 2010 and 2015. These projects focused mainly on the provision of wheat, buses, and equipment for the National System for Disaster Prevention (SINAPRED) (17.73 percent) (OECD, 2023; BCN, 2023). As shown in *Table 1*, Russia made its last official donation in 2015<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Since 2021, the Central Bank of Nicaragua has published semiannual reports on the evolution of FDI. However, these reports do not provide a comprehensive country-level breakdown, which limits the ability to directly assess Russian investment. As a result, this analysis relies on secondary sources, including ECLAC reports on FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean, global investment databases such as UNCTADstat and fDi Markets, national business registries, and specialized media analysis.

<sup>10</sup> Although pro-government media outlets continue to report donations of wheat, food, or vaccines, official reports from the Central Bank have not confirmed any additional contributions after 2015.

**TABLE #1**

# OFFICIAL COOPERATION FROM THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO NICARAGUA

Projects	Millions of USD								
	2007	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Cumulative	%
Wheat			9	30.17	30.27			69.44	46%
Bus fleet		8	22.5					30.5	20%
Transport equipment and vehicles – SINAPRED Program I			14.69	6.25		5.63		26.57	18%
Budget support		10						10	7%
Humanitarian assistance for population affected by floods and landslides				1	4.87			5.87	4%
Support for external commercial debt buyback operations		5						5	3%
Mechanization services for small and medium agricultural producers (tractors and harvesters acquisition) 2015							1.39	1.39	1%
Vehicles (100 units)							1.1	1.1	1%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>46.19</b>	<b>37.42</b>	<b>35.14</b>	<b>5.63</b>	<b>2.49</b>	<b>149.87</b>	

Following the cessation of these flows, the bilateral relationship shifted toward areas of strategic cooperation, such as the installation in 2017 of a ground station for the GLONASS satellite system<sup>11</sup> and the authorization, beginning in 2022, for the periodic entry of Russian troops and assets into the country<sup>12</sup>. Although this does not constitute private investment in the conventional sense, the installation of Russian military and technological capabilities in Nicaraguan territory represents a form of “strategic investment” that strengthens Russia’s geopolitical positioning in the region.

Within this same logic, recent developments point to a revitalization of Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation through new donations with a strong symbolic dimension. Between 2022 and 2025, repeated deliveries of food products, including flour and oil<sup>13</sup>, were recorded, along with health-related contributions such as vaccines against mpox and the donation of 200,000 doses of the Russian yellow fever vaccine. These actions were accompanied by carefully staged media coverage, including official ceremonies held at state facilities such as ENABAS warehouses in Los Brasiles, and the visible participation of Nicaraguan government authorities, including Laureano Ortega Murillo, Lilliam Herrera (Minister of Education), and Iván Acosta (Minister of Finance and Public Credit), alongside Russian ambassadors such as Alexander Khokhólikov and Mikhail Ledenev. During these events, public statements emphasized the “fraternal,” “solidary,” and “selfless” nature of Russian cooperation with Nicaragua.

In the case of the announcement of a Russian Vaccine and Medicines Distribution Center in Managua, publicized in June 2023, official narratives framed the initiative as a qualitative milestone in bilateral cooperation. It was presented as moving beyond isolated donations toward positioning Nicaragua as a regional hub

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<sup>11</sup> The station is operated by Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, under a bilateral agreement that, although formally civilian, has been internationally questioned for its possible dual use for intelligence purposes (Tlis, 2017). Roscosmos is a state corporation directly controlled by the government of Vladimir Putin, and its operations respond to both technological and strategic objectives.

<sup>12</sup> In 2022, the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved a decree that authorizes the periodic entry of Russian troops, vessels, and aircraft into the country for joint exercises, training, and technical assistance. This decision was interpreted by the United States as a signal of alignment with Moscow in a global context marked by the war in Ukraine and the diplomatic isolation of the Kremlin (Reuters, 2022; OECD, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> In December 2022, Russia delivered 348 metric tons of wheat flour. In October 2023, the delivery of 172 tons of wheat flour and more than 300 tons of sunflower oil to the School Feeding Program was reported, valued at more than 2 million dollars, channeled through the World Food Programme (WFP) and publicly presented in official events led by Laureano Ortega, Iván Acosta, and the Russian ambassador.

for the distribution of Russian pharmaceutical products across Latin America. In public statements, Laureano Ortega Murillo emphasized that the center would “ensure timely access to high-quality medicines and vaccines” for Nicaragua and other countries in the region, reinforcing notions of health sovereignty and reduced dependence on traditional markets. Russian representatives involved in health cooperation highlighted that the project would consolidate a “strategic logistical platform” for Russia’s scientific and pharmaceutical presence in the region.

Similarly, the donation of Russian yellow fever vaccines, received on July 30, 2025, and produced by the Chumakov Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences and delivered with the support of the Mechnikov Latin American Institute of Biotechnology, a joint Russian-Nicaraguan enterprise, was framed not only as a response to an immediate national need but also as part of a broader regional health architecture. Within this framing, Nicaragua is positioned as integrated into wider Russian pharmaceutical production and distribution networks, reinforcing the image of Russia as a central actor in strengthening public health systems in Latin America and the Caribbean.

By contrast, Russian loans have been discreet and minimally publicized. In 2021, a credit agreement was signed for EUR 16.8 million to finance the purchase of Russian buses. In 2022 and 2023, disbursements of USD 8.48 million and USD 9.41 million were recorded, respectively, totaling USD 17.89 million, equivalent to just 0.22 percent of total loans received by Nicaragua between 2007 and 2023 (USD 8.13 billion). The political use of these loans has been evident. During bus delivery ceremonies in 2023, Daniel Ortega avoided referring to them as purchases or credit agreements. Instead, formulations such as “we have received buses” were used, without clarifying the financial nature of the transaction. This ambiguity has contributed to reinforcing a perception of unconditional cooperation, forming part of a broader narrative strategy aimed at strengthening regime legitimacy through Russian engagement.

Based on this economic overview, Russian contributions, both in cooperation and trade, appear intermittent and limited in scale, without consolidating a stable framework of economic engagement. Between 2007 and 2023, Russian cooperation

accounted for less than 2 percent of external resources received by Nicaragua, while trade remained structurally imbalanced in favor of Moscow. Despite official rhetoric of a strategic alliance, in practice bilateral trade remains unequal, investment is marginal, and financial flows have not generated productive capacities or long-term linkages. This is compounded by the limited transparency of bilateral loans, which constrains the ability to assess their impact on public debt and generates uncertainty regarding the economic risks associated with such agreements.

Nicaragua thus emerges as a low-cost testing ground for Russian engagement in the region, where Moscow's strategic interests intersect with the Ortega government's needs for legitimacy, financing, and political control.

## SOFT POWER

One of the most evident and strategic manifestations of Russian soft power in Nicaragua has been articulated through the educational, cultural, and media spheres. Far from being simple diplomatic gestures, these actions constitute an institutional and symbolic network that seeks to shape values, perceptions, and geopolitical affinities among key sectors of Nicaraguan society, particularly among university students, organized youth, communication professionals, and emerging elites linked to the Sandinista government.

In the educational sphere, a central component of this strategy has been the renewal and expansion of state scholarships offered by the Russian government to Nicaraguan students, mainly since 2022. Although official sources do not provide exhaustive detail on selection processes or the institutions of origin of the beneficiaries, the nature of the fields of study (security, technology, telecommunications, international relations, and culture) suggests that many of these students could be linked to entities such as the National Police, Telcor (the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority), or the National Council of Universities (CNU), all of them bodies with strong political alignment with the authoritarian Executive. This opacity is not incidental. It forms part of a broader pattern of control over public information that, at the same time, favors the configuration of networks of ideological loyalty around Russia as a non-Western strategic partner.

This logic is further reinforced through initiatives developed directly within Nicaraguan territory. Russia has expanded its presence through educational and media exchanges articulated with public universities under government control, including the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), the National University Gaspar García Laviana, and the National University Casimiro Sotelo Montenegro, created after the expropriation of the Central American University (UCA), a historically critical institution of the government. The selection of these universities responds to clear operational criteria, as their political dependence on the State allows Moscow to access institutional channels

of legitimization without needing to negotiate with independent academic sectors. In these spaces, workshops, conferences, and training activities have been carried out, primarily aimed at young Sandinista leaders and aligned communication professionals, in which Russian experts have lectured on new technologies, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and “strategies to combat disinformation,” concepts often framed within a logic that seeks to counter the dominant Western narrative regarding conflicts such as the war in Ukraine or the human rights situation in Russia and Nicaragua.

The cultural dimension complements this deployment through instruments of public diplomacy aimed at generating symbolic identification. In recent years, Nicaragua has promoted various Russian film festivals, primarily targeting urban youth audiences, with the aim of fostering emotional identification and cultural recognition toward the Russian narrative. These events, often organized at the National Cinematheque, include film screenings and discussions with Russian writers, historians, and officials who seek to convey a worldview alternative to U.S. cultural hegemony.



**Image #1.** Laureano Ortega Murillo participates in a cultural event organized by the Russian embassy in Managua (2025). Photograph: *El 19 Digital*.

On 20 November 2025, the Rubén Darío National Theater, in coordination with the Embassy of Russia and the Russian House in Nicaragua, celebrated the centenary of the birth of Maya Plisetskaya, a Russian ballerina, choreographer, and actress, and principal dancer of the Bolshoi Theatre, with a high-level delegation. The tribute included a keynote lecture on her life, delivered by a professor from UNAN Managua.

This cultural strategy is complemented by the promotion of non-academic youth exchanges, conceived as spaces of political socialization. One example is the participation of Nicaraguan delegations in the *Eurasia Global International Forum*, an event organized by the Russian Federal Agency for Youth (*Rosmolodezh*) that brings together young leaders from around the world. Although the event is presented as a platform for intercultural dialogue, in practice it functions as a channel for the dissemination of narratives favorable to the Kremlin, framed as multiculturalism, in which participants are selected based on ideological affinities and a critical view of the liberal international order is reinforced.

Similarly, binational scientific congresses operate, especially in sectors such as health, where Russian experts have collaborated with Nicaraguan institutions to transfer medical, technological, and pharmaceutical knowledge. Although this cooperation has been presented as evidence of Russian-Nicaraguan solidarity, it also responds to concrete geopolitical interests by projecting Russia as a reliable partner in strategic areas where Western presence has declined.

The strategic nature of these initiatives becomes more evident when examining their insertion into the internal dynamics of the Ortega government. While Russia has positioned its narrative, culture, and academic apparatus in key spaces of Nicaraguan society, Nicaraguan cultural expressions in Russian territory remain minimal, symbolic, and with limited visibility (see an example, among the few, in *Figure 6*). The relationship, therefore, lacks structural reciprocity. An illustrative example of this asymmetry is the organization of meetings with Russian writers in Managua, widely publicized and promoted by state institutions, contrasted with the absence of similar initiatives promoting Nicaraguan literature or art in cities such as Moscow or Saint Petersburg. This gap reflects not only disparities in available resources but also the unilateral orientation of Russian interest, focused on consolidating its *soft power* rather than fostering a genuine and balanced exchange.



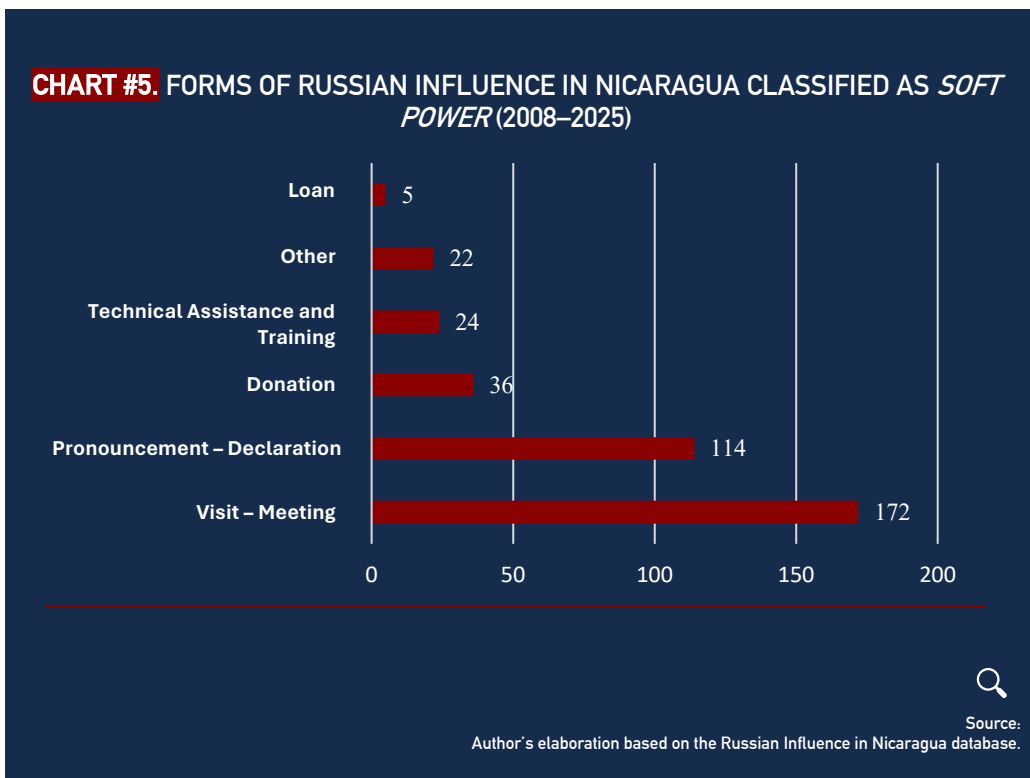
**Image #2** Embassy of Nicaragua at a Sandinista event in Moscow in November 2025.  
Photograph: *El 19 Digital*.

The Embassy of Nicaragua in Russia held a commemorative event marking the 49th anniversary of the death of Carlos Fonseca Amador. The ceremony took place at Friendship Park in Moscow, where a stele in his memory is located. Participants included embassy officials, members of the Nicaraguan National Police, and representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as diplomats from Cuba, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

This instrumentalization of *soft power* must also be read in terms of domestic politics. For the Ortega government, these activities represent a way of reinforcing ideological control over strategic sectors such as youth, education, and the media. By promoting the Russian narrative, characterized by its opposition to liberalism, universal human rights, and the independent press, the government of Daniel Ortega legitimizes its own authoritarian trajectory within a framework of “anti-imperialist resistance” that serves to consolidate its social base. At the same time, for Moscow, Nicaragua becomes a piece on the American geopolitical board from which to project symbolic influence and construct an international image as a “reliable partner” that challenges the regional order led by Washington.

*Soft power* also unfolds in the symbolic realm, where diplomatic statements and official visits are key to the production of international legitimacy (see *Figure 8*). Between 2008 and 2025, 114 official statements were documented that can be classified as manifestations of *soft power*. These include congratulatory messages, notes of solidarity, commemorative greetings, and joint declarations linked to national anniversaries, diplomatic milestones, electoral processes, and other shared historical events, and are not limited to written diplomatic exchanges but

are also expressed in public speeches, commemorative acts, and institutionalized cultural ceremonies. These communications, beyond their formal nature, fulfill clear political functions, as they reinforce the narrative of strategic convergence, project an image of stability and consensus between both governments, and construct a discursive framework that seeks to justify Nicaragua's alignment with Russia in multilateral forums, acquiring a performative character in contexts of high international tension, as they not only communicate support but also publicly materialize the diplomatic loyalty of the Ortega government to the Kremlin.



More significant still has been the frequency and density of bilateral visits and meetings between Nicaraguan and Russian representatives, which constitute the most recurrent expression of *soft power* in this period, with a total of 172 recorded interactions. These meetings range from high-level protocol encounters to technical exchanges, cultural missions, parliamentary visits, and joint participation in international forums. Their importance lies in their capacity to institutionalize the diplomatic relationship, facilitate the strategic exchange of information, and generate new opportunities for cooperation at multiple levels. An emblematic case of this type of event was the protocol farewell of Alexander Khokhólikov, Russian ambassador to Nicaragua, held in September 2024. In his closing speech, Khokhólikov highlighted the achievements reached since his arrival in November 2020, emphasizing priority areas such as education (with the reactivation of the state scholarship program), biotechnology, public health (especially with the supply of Sputnik vaccines and the planning of the Nuclear Medicine Center), and security (with the training of more than 2,353 Latin American police officers at the Russian Training Center in Managua).

The ambassador also highlighted the strengthening of commercial and cultural ties, including strategic agreements in public transportation and food assistance through the School Feeding Program, partially financed by Russian cooperation. For his part, Laureano Ortega Murillo praised the ambassador's role in consolidating bilateral ties and described his work as "*a strategic contribution in times of global transformation.*"

The constant exaltation of "*shared values,*" "*cooperation without conditions,*" and "*friendship between peoples*" serves to obscure the lack of transparency in signed agreements, the opaque character of many intergovernmental arrangements, and the growing symbolic subordination of Managua to Moscow's interests. These visits, therefore, operate as exercises of reaffirmation of diplomatic alignment.

In addition to the symbolic component, the bilateral relationship includes a practical dimension of influence through technical assistance and training. Within the realm of *soft power*, these actions are presented as altruistic cooperation but pursue clear objectives of legitimization and strategic positioning. The analysis identified at least 24 initiatives of this type, which form part of a process of

institutionalization of Russian *soft power*, in which knowledge and capacity transfer become instruments of diplomacy.

One of the most representative examples of this dynamic was the scientific-practical seminar titled “*Ways to reduce maternal and infant mortality*,” organized by the National Medical Research Center of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Perinatology V.I. Kulakov of the Russian Ministry of Health. Held between 2 and 6 September 2024 at the Bertha Calderón Roque Hospital, the event brought together 50 Nicaraguan specialist doctors. This type of meeting operates as a platform of visibility for Russian cooperation and legitimizes its institutional presence within the structures of the Nicaraguan public health system.

These training activities are accompanied by protocol events, speeches with geopolitical content, and media coverage that insist on the benefits of having Russia as a “*strategic partner*” rather than depending on Western cooperation. This discursive framework normalizes the Russian presence as part of the Nicaraguan institutional ecosystem and blurs the boundaries between technical cooperation and geopolitical positioning.

In continuity with this logic, donations and concessional loans constitute the economic component of the previously described symbolic and institutional framework, although with clearly unequal weight. In the analyzed corpus, 36 instances of donations were identified, some previously described, compared to only five instances of loans and credit facilities with media coverage. Loans and concessional credit appear in a more limited and strategic manner within this architecture of *soft power*. They concentrate in specific moments, particularly from 2016 onward and with greater intensity in 2021, and are directed toward sectors such as infrastructure, technological security, and urban transport. They are presented in the official narrative as milestones of cooperation and achievements of government management, in some cases coinciding with electoral cycles.

This is clearly observed in the coverage of Eximbank of Russia credits for the purchase of buses in 2021, where the communicational emphasis focused on the “delivery” of the units, the events led by Ortega and Murillo, and the social benefit of public transport. In the official narrative, the fact that these were acquisitions

financed through credit rather than donations was diluted. Similarly, the subsequent deliveries of buses in 2023 are presented as a continuation of Russian cooperation and as direct results of government management, with little emphasis on costs, financing conditions, or their fiscal impact.

Russian *soft power* in Nicaragua is therefore a structured strategy of symbolic insertion, modeling of subjectivities, and discursive legitimization that operates in synchrony with *hard power* and *sharp power*. Its effectiveness lies in its apparent neutrality and its capacity to conceal strategic objectives under the guise of cultural exchange, educational cooperation, diplomatic statements, official visits, technical assistance and training programs, and donations. However, as Nye (2004) has warned, *soft power* is not neutral and can be used as a tool of geopolitical influence, especially in contexts where public freedoms are eroded and the state controls educational institutions and the media.



## HARD POWER

Although manifestations of *hard power* have been significantly less frequent than expressions of *soft power* in the bilateral relationship between Nicaragua and Russia during the 2008–2025 period, their strategic importance is considerable due to their marked political and military content. In this period, 53 bilateral interactions were documented that are classified as *hard power*, mainly centered on cooperation in security and defense, as well as on Nicaragua’s explicit alignment with Russian positions in international forums. These interactions also tend to concentrate in contexts of increasing diplomatic isolation and rising international pressure on the Ortega government, particularly since 2013 and with a sustained increase beginning in 2021.

Russian *hard power* has materialized primarily through high-level visits, bilateral meetings, and the signing of strategic agreements aimed at strengthening defensive capacities and projecting Russian presence in Central America. An illustrative example of this dynamic is the participation of a Nicaraguan delegation in the Moscow military parade on 9 May 2025, a commemoration that brought together Russia’s allied leaders and showcased both symbolic and material military capabilities. The Nicaraguan presence reaffirmed bilateral political alignment and symbolically legitimized military cooperation between the two countries in a context of increasing geopolitical polarization.

This dimension was reinforced domestically in an event held in Managua on 8 May 2025, in the Plaza de la Revolución. The event, which included the march of the so-called “Immortal Regiment” and the display of a replica of the Red Army flag, reproduced in Managua the main symbols of Russian and Soviet historical memory. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Valdrack Jaentschke, when conveying greetings from Nicaragua’s “co-presidents,” Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo (his wife), to the Russian people, emphasized the continuity of an alliance forged in resistance to fascism and imperialism.

At the same time, the celebration incorporated elements of *soft power* through a Russian folk music concert at the Rubén Darío National Theater, which featured the participation of the Camerata Bach and the Rubén Darío Youth Symphony Orchestra. The repertoire included traditional pieces such as *Kalinka* and *The Sacred War*, symbols of Russian culture and history. This cultural event was attended by members of the Russian community in Nicaragua and diplomatic representatives, and contributed to projecting Russia's presence beyond the military and political spheres.

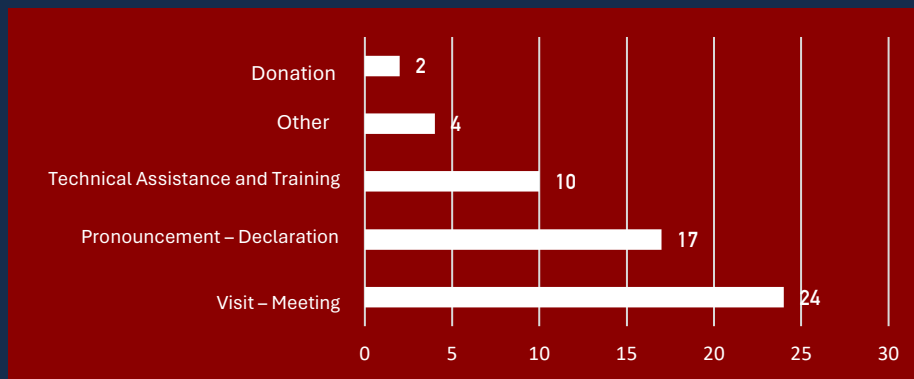


**Image #3** Colonel General Marvin Corrales is interviewed after participating, along with a delegation, in a military parade in Red Square in Moscow. Photographs: El 19 Digital.

Colonel General Corrales, Inspector of the Nicaraguan Army, shared his impressions of the military parade in Moscow and emphasized that a significant part of the Nicaraguan Army's equipment is of Russian origin. He reiterated the importance of intergovernmental military cooperation agreements between both countries.

In material terms, Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation has not been characterized by a massive or systematic transfer of military capabilities. Rather, it has consisted of selective and targeted interventions that combined the provision of equipment, technical assistance, and specialized training. This dynamic became particularly visible from the mid-2010s (between 2013 and 2016), when Nicaragua incorporated Russian-origin weaponry and systems (such as T-72B1 tanks, ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft defense systems, and Mi-17 helicopters), accompanied by technical training mechanisms, including simulation systems and operational training. Although these transfers did not substantially alter the regional military balance, they reveal a modality of *hard power* that is functional, oriented more toward the consolidation of strategic ties and the generation of technical dependence than toward the projection of large-scale conventional military power.

**CHART #6. FORMS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN NICARAGUA CLASSIFIED AS *HARD POWER* (2008–2025)**



Source:  
Author's elaboration based on the Russian Influence in Nicaragua database.

From 2017 onward, cooperation progressively shifted toward the realm of internal security and police training, becoming the most consistent and tangible dimension of *hard power* in the country. That year, a regional anti-narcotics police academy was inaugurated in Managua, led by the Russian Ministry of the Interior, with Russian instructors responsible for training police personnel from Nicaragua and other Latin American countries in critical areas such as public security and the fight against drug trafficking, strategic sectors for maintaining internal order and regional stability. This type of cooperation goes beyond the mere transfer of knowledge and techniques, as it implies direct influence on the ideological and operational formation of security forces. This initiative was highlighted by the outgoing Russian ambassador, Alexander Khokhólikov, who, in his farewell speech, stated that Russia had already trained more than 2,000 Latin American police officers in Nicaraguan territory.

In the same year, in April 2017, a ground station of the Russian satellite navigation system GLONASS was inaugurated in Managua, as previously mentioned. This infrastructure, installed within the framework of scientific and technical cooperation agreements between both countries, is linked to agreements with the Russian space agency Roscosmos, requiring the continuous presence of Russian technical personnel in Nicaraguan territory. Although it was officially presented

as a resource to improve navigation, risk management, and response to natural disasters, the station has generated sustained concerns at the regional and international level due to its potential dual use as a positioning system and as a possible node for signal collection or support for broader intelligence activities in the region.

Cooperation was further deepened through formal agreements and the strengthening of institutional security networks. In December 2022, the National Police of Nicaragua and the National Guard of Russia signed a cooperation agreement on security for the exchange of experiences, training, and operational cooperation in addressing threats such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism, areas that both governments consider priorities for internal and regional stability. In May 2023, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (*MOU*) on cybersecurity expanded this logic to the technological dimension. This document aimed to establish channels of cooperation to protect critical digital infrastructure, share information on cyber threats, and develop joint cyber defense capacities.

These agreements have been accompanied by high-level exchanges between officials. The visit of Laureano Ortega Murillo to Moscow in December 2023 thus constituted a key moment for deepening these relations, as it included meetings with relevant figures from the Russian security apparatus, such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. These encounters demonstrated the Ortega government's interest in strengthening its internal security capacities and its willingness to integrate into Russia's strategic agenda. At the same time, the participation of the Nicaraguan Army in joint meetings with the National Guard and the Russian Ministry of Defense reflected the consolidation of a shared military agenda. This process sought to expand technical cooperation to strengthen defense capacities in a regional scenario characterized by great power competition and the redefinition of traditional alliances.

Likewise, Nicaragua's repeated interventions in defense of the Russian position within the framework of the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral forums stand out with particular relevance, where it has systematically rejected Western sanctions against Russia and invoked principles of international law, such as

sovereignty and non-intervention. This position, reinforced by support resolutions approved by the National Assembly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Nicaragua's recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea, projected a sustained political alignment with Moscow and positioned Nicaragua as an actor actively committed to promoting a multipolar international order.

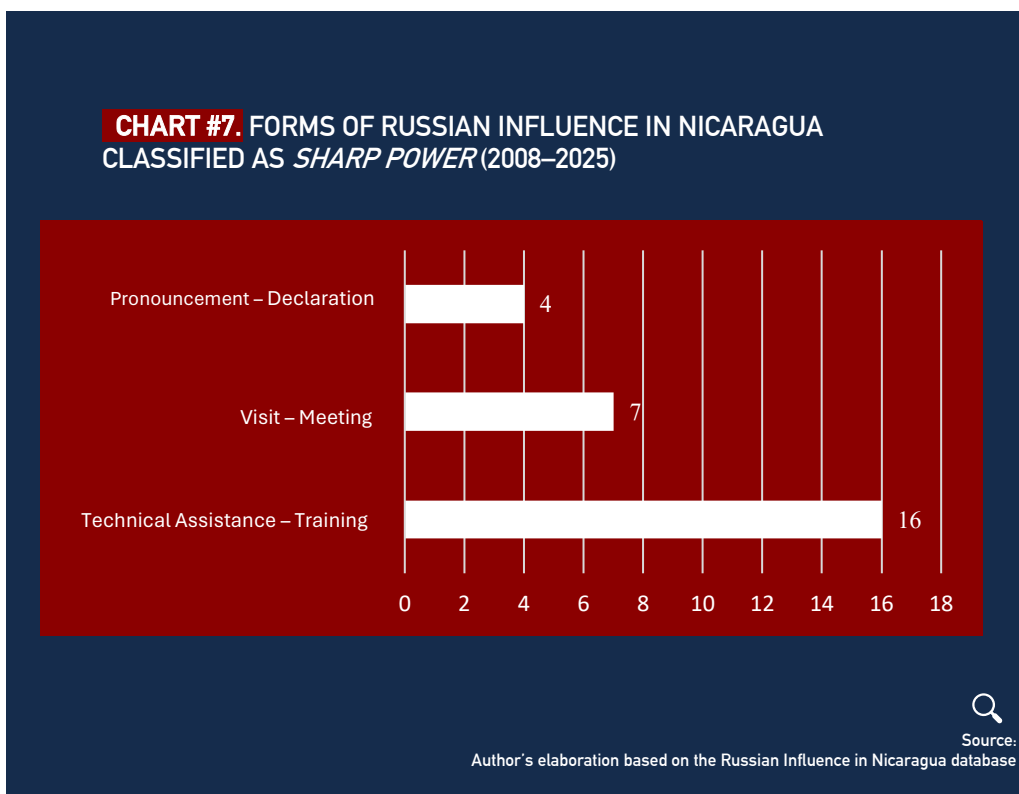
Consistent with this political alignment, technical assistance and training in security-related areas have continued to be the most tangible manifestation of *hard power*. Among these, the announcement in April 2024 of the approval of a cooperation agreement to strengthen the training and professionalization of the Nicaraguan police stands out. This agreement created a legal framework for the operation of a training center in Managua jointly managed by the National Police of Nicaragua and the Russian Ministry of the Interior, with an initial duration of ten years and the possibility of admitting police personnel from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, aimed at improving and updating professional capacities in areas such as public security, order maintenance, and crime prevention.

In addition, Nicaragua has authorized the entry and exit of foreign troops, including Russian contingents, within the framework of existing military cooperation agreements. Nicaraguan authorities justify these authorizations under the premise of humanitarian exercises and joint maritime security operations, an official explanation that seeks to mitigate potential international criticism. However, in practice, these exchanges contribute to reinforcing Russia's strategic presence in Central America. An additional element of this cooperation has been the direct training of Nicaraguan officers in specialized institutions in Russia. A notable example in 2024 was the graduation of Nicaraguan police personnel from a university in Moscow, within the framework of an agreement between the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior and its Russian counterpart. According to official sources, these agents acquired specializations in forensic expertise and psychology, technical competencies that strengthen the investigative and operational capacities of Nicaraguan security forces and demonstrate the transfer of specific knowledge in areas of high complexity and potential authoritarian application.

Finally, Russia's incorporation as a Permanent Observer State in the Central American Parliament (*PARLACEN*), formalized in September 2024, constituted a significant milestone in the institutionalization of its political presence in Central America. This decision, actively promoted by Nicaraguan deputy and *PARLACEN* vice president Guillermo Daniel Ortega Reyes, allows Moscow to integrate into a regional space of political deliberation, expanding its capacity to influence debates related to governance and regional integration.

## SHARP POWER

Manifestations of *sharp power* in the bilateral relationship between Russia and Nicaragua have become evident through at least 23 documented instances of technical influence and training processes, recorded mainly between 2022 and 2025, most of them in the context of official visits and strategic meetings (see *Figure 11*). These spaces have not only served as settings for the exchange of knowledge but have also functioned as effective mechanisms to strengthen communicational hegemony and the projection of a shared narrative between both countries.



Unlike other forms of influence, *sharp power* has been deployed in a sustained manner since 2022, following an identifiable progression. In an initial phase, during 2022, the institutional link was formalized through the signing of cooperation memoranda between the Communication and Citizenship Council of Nicaragua and Russian state media outlets *Sputnik* and *RT en Español*, establishing the legal and political foundations of the collaboration. Subsequently, in 2023 and 2024, the strategy deepened through recurring training sessions, professional

exchanges, specialized workshops, and the systematic insertion of Russian content in Nicaraguan pro-government media, as well as in public universities and in spaces for training communication professionals. Finally, between 2024 and 2025, cooperation reached a phase of greater institutionalization and political visibility, characterized by explicit discursive support from the highest levels of the executive branch, the symbolic normalization of the alliance, and its articulation with regional and multilateral spaces.



**Image #4** Learning exchange between *RT en Español* and pro-government journalists.

On 27 October 2025, at the National Cinematheque in Managua, a learning exchange took place between *RT en Español* and communicators from Nicaraguan pro-government media, aimed at “strengthening communication capacities.” Daniel Edmundo Ortega, coordinator of the Young Communicators Network and son of Daniel Ortega, participated, along with representatives of *RT en Español*.

A central aspect of this cooperation has been the close collaboration between Russian state media with international reach, *RT (Russia Today)* and *Sputnik*, and the Ortega government, particularly through its official communication and propaganda bodies. This alliance constitutes a modality of *sharp power* that seeks to influence, in an indirect but persistent manner, the journalistic routines and interpretive frameworks of Nicaraguan journalism. The transfer of technologies, information production methodologies, and specialized training schemes, developed continuously since 2023 and directed at Nicaraguan communicators,

has had the explicit objective of consolidating a discourse aligned both with Russian geopolitical interests and with the political narrative of Sandinismo, systematically presented as a defense of the “truth” against a Western informational order characterized as hegemonic and hostile.

The training sessions organized within the framework of media cooperation between Russia and Nicaragua were primarily directed at professionals in the sector, including journalists, broadcasters, content producers, and young Nicaraguan leaders, who are key actors in the construction and dissemination of the official and authoritarian discourse in the country. Between 2023 and 2024, these training spaces included the active participation of prominent officials from Russian state media outlets *RT* and *Sputnik*, who delivered specialized content. The training focused on the construction of strategic narratives aligned with Russian geopolitical interests and with the narrative of the Sandinista government. During these meetings, various communication strategies and advanced audiovisual production techniques were presented, with emphasis on covering events from a perspective favorable to Moscow and Managua.

Workshops and seminars also addressed the use of new digital technologies, including artificial intelligence applications for media monitoring, as well as strategies of political communication. These spaces also actively promoted *RT* and *Sputnik* as legitimate and reliable sources of information.

Unlike other international and training spaces in which Laureano Ortega Murillo has been prominent, these media initiatives highlight the role of Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, also the son of President Daniel Ortega (see *Figure 12*). Daniel Edmundo has assumed a central role as media coordinator of the Communication and Citizenship Council, a key body in the design and implementation of the government’s communication policy. His leadership has been fundamental in articulating collaborations with Russian media and supervising training processes and content production in line with government interests. An emblematic example of this dynamic was the visit of a high-level delegation from the *Sputnik* News Agency to Nicaragua in November 2024, on the occasion of the agency’s tenth anniversary. The delegation was led by Olga Lisogor, Director General of *Sputnik*, accompanied by Daria Yuryeva and Artem Chibarov, who were officially received

by Daniel Edmundo Ortega. This event symbolized the consolidation of institutional ties between *Sputnik* and the Nicaraguan communication apparatus and served as a platform to renew strategic commitments and project a shared narrative at the regional and international levels.

In addition to training sessions and meetings, at least four relevant official statements were recorded within the framework of *sharp power*, evidencing the discursive articulation between both nations. A notable case occurred in September 2024, when Rosario Murillo issued a statement strongly condemning the sanctions imposed by the United States against Russian media outlets such as *RT*, *Sputnik*, and *Rossiya Segodnya*. In her statement, Murillo explicitly defended these outlets as bearers of “true truths” and framed their work within a shared narrative of sovereignty and resistance against Western censorship. This support was reinforced on 13 September 2024, when Murillo published the statement titled “Más Agresión a la Verdad,” in which she again condemned U.S. sanctions and positioned Nicaragua as an active ally of Russian media on the international stage.

Russian *sharp power* is articulated with the Sandinista model of information control and the construction of authoritarian consensus. It therefore constitutes a reinforcing cycle that strengthens the political stability of the Ortega government and its positioning in the international arena. The combination of specialized technical assistance, the training of communicators, and official visits is transforming the media sphere into a key terrain where Russian presence in Nicaragua and the region is materialized.



## PROSPECTIVE SCENARIOS

Based on the findings of this study, we project three scenarios with the aim of identifying the risks and opportunities that could arise from different combinations of political, military, and economic developments in the relationship between Nicaragua and Russia. These scenarios provide an analytical framework for understanding how Russian influence could evolve and what its impacts on governance and hemispheric security might be.

In a first scenario, a stagnation of cooperation between Nicaragua and Russia is envisioned, in which levels similar to the current ones are maintained without significant expansion in the military, media, or educational spheres. Russian influence would remain relevant in symbolic and political terms, although limited in its material and practical impact. For the country, the risks include the persistence of certain strategic dependencies that limit the capacity to diversify foreign policy and to make autonomous decisions in security matters.

In a second scenario, a deepening of Russian alignment is considered, with military, security, and cybersecurity cooperation intensifying while media and educational programs are consolidated and expanded. Moscow would gain greater symbolic and geopolitical prominence both in domestic politics and in Nicaragua's international projection. Risks include an increase in political and security dependence on Russia, the strengthening of state control capacities, and potential tensions with the international community. This would allow the Ortega government to consolidate its narrative of sovereignty and multipolarity, and to strengthen strategic relations with a global actor.

In a third scenario, an internal reconfiguration in favor of China and to the detriment of Russia is envisioned, with sustained growth in Chinese influence through investment, financing, and infrastructure, while Russian presence declines in strategic sectors. The risks of this relationship are clear, as ties with China are even more asymmetric than those with Russia and could generate long-term economic and technological dependence, compromise the country's strategic

autonomy, strain relations with regional and Western actors, and expose it to projects with limited transparency, financial risks, and questionable practices in investment management.

Among the three scenarios, it is projected that a combination of the second and third is highly likely. While the relationship with Russia deepens in the aforementioned areas, the Ortega government will also consolidate its ties with China. This will form part of a rhetoric of multipolarity and of counterbalancing the United States in the region, in a context in which the government is increasingly internationally isolated and internally delegitimized.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Russia's strategic footprint in Nicaragua shows that Russian influence is defined by the articulation of soft, sharp, and hard power instruments that affect sensitive areas of the state and the political regime. Over the past two decades, Moscow has consolidated a selective but persistent presence, with effects that go beyond the bilateral relationship and pose relevant challenges for both democratic governance and hemispheric security.

The link between Nicaragua and Russia can be characterized as politically significant but materially limited. Moscow has not sought structural economic insertion, but rather a functional relationship oriented toward security, defense, and the symbolic legitimization of Daniel Ortega. This strategy has allowed it to maintain a geopolitical presence in Central America at relatively low cost, while reinforcing its narrative of global projection and multipolarity. For Daniel Ortega, the relationship fulfills an instrumental role within a broader strategy of diversifying external alliances (anti-US) and resisting international isolation, although at the same time it deepens dynamics of political and security dependence.

One of the main findings is the hybrid nature of Russian influence. Expressions of hard power, materialized in cooperation in security, cybersecurity, and police and military training, as well as in the installation of strategic infrastructure such as the GLONASS station, intertwine with strategies of soft and sharp power aimed at shaping perceptions, narratives, and ideological alignments. Educational, cultural, and media instruments also reinforce the narrative of a comprehensive alliance presented as a defense of sovereignty against external pressures.

This strategic footprint has direct implications for democratic governance in Nicaragua, as it contributes to the strengthening of practices of opacity, concentration of power, and institutional capture, especially in the security and communication sectors. At the same time, it poses risks for hemispheric security,

insofar as it normalizes the presence of extraregional actors with their own geopolitical agendas in a region historically sensitive to power disputes and authoritarianism. The Nicaraguan experience offers, in this sense, useful elements for understanding similar dynamics that could be reproduced in other contexts in the region.

Faced with this scenario, it is necessary to advance in three complementary lines of action. First, it is essential to strengthen state and regional capacities for geopolitical risk assessment in order to identify these influence dynamics early, especially those that combine cooperation in security, strategic infrastructure, and narrative projection. Second, it is vital to consolidate observatories of extraregional influences from academia and civil society to systematize information, generate independent analysis, and sustain continuous monitoring less conditioned by political conjunctures. Finally, we also argue that it is crucial, as Expediente Abierto does in this document, to develop timely and real-time communication of results and trends, which emerges as a central component to reduce information asymmetries, counter disinformation narratives, and strengthen democratic response capacity at the national and regional levels.

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This report examines the expanding bilateral relationship between Nicaragua and Russia between 2008 and 2025, a particularly revealing case in the Western Hemisphere. The evidence indicates that this relationship has developed steadily, albeit with relatively limited scope, and has been strongly supported by political, cultural, and informational narratives since Daniel Ortega (FSLN) returned to power in 2007.