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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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06.02.2025

## **Control and Worse: Trump is Criminalizing All of Latin America**

A painted wall in the center of Mexico City. Photo by Tamara Pearson.

From preparing to send migrants to Guantanamo Bay, to labeling cartels “terrorist organizations,” Trump has been using both language and policies to frame Latin American countries and Latinx migrants in the US, as criminal. Painting the entire region as a source of danger, as the enemy, rather than as a partner, paves the way for coercion, subjugation, and the normalization of human rights violations. It is a path for the US to advance its business interests and nationalism through control rather than the usual pretense of diplomacy and dialogue.

### **Terrorists and tariffs**

In just two weeks, Trump has put Cuba back on the terrorist list, signed an executive order deeming cartels terrorist organizations, with specific reference to those in Mexico that are apparently “flooding” the US with drugs and violence, as well as a couple of others in Venezuela and Central America, and instructed the departments of Defense and Homeland Security to prepare the US naval base on Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to hold migrants.

He said there were 30,000 beds there to “detain the worst criminal illegal aliens threatening the American people,” adding that some migrants are “so bad we don’t even trust the countries to hold them because we don’t want them coming back. So we’re going to send them out to Guantanamo.” The US has previously used the base to hold untried, so-called suspects of terrorism. The Pentagon said it would send “the worst of the worst” — whatever that means, when referring to people who are in life-threatening danger or so exploited or impoverished they had to flee their homeland — to Guantanamo this weekend, but at the time of writing, that didn’t appear to have happened yet.

At the same time, countries that don't do what Trump wants, including impossible and inhumane requests like stopping all migrants, get threatened with tariffs. When Colombia refused to accept military planes deporting migrants precisely because it criminalizes them, Trump wrote, "We will not allow the Colombian government to violate its legal obligations with regard to the acceptance and return of the criminals they forced into the US," then threatened 25% tariffs and a travel ban on Colombian government officials. He also threatened BRICS countries with tariffs if they replace the US dollar as reserve currency, and signed an order Saturday imposing 25% tariffs on Mexico for allegedly not doing enough to stop migrants and drugs from reaching the US.

Reinforcing this control over Latin America, he ordered the Gulf of Mexico be renamed the Gulf of America, and vowed to "take back" the Panama Canal.

### **Violating refugee and migrants' rights, in a show of racism**

And while coercing Latin America, Trump has also made a big show of deporting Latinxs and denying Latin American migrants entry at the Mexico-US border. In violation of both US and international laws and basic human rights, Trump has suspended the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), and now people can't request asylum and be interviewed to determine credible fear. However, Trump used an executive order to pass this, even though it requires congressional approval. He also wants to revive Remain in Mexico, though Mexican president Sheinbaum has refused.

He has told quite the story of carrying out "the largest deportation in American history," but the reality is that deportations are very expensive, and migrants still have to be able to argue their case before a judge first. There is an enormous backlog of cases (3.5 million still open) so Trump's grand standing — while having real and horrific concrete consequences for mean — isn't so feasible in practice. In the first few days of his term, his administration deported 600 or so people per day, then reached a thousand. In 2024, Biden deported 270,000 people, an average of 739 per day.

But, these deportations are being talked up by the media and raids are being televised live, in order to put on a show that popularizes the criminalizing of migrants, and demarcates Latinxs and Latin Americans ("illegals" and "criminals") as the scary enemy. The cameras were ready to photograph people arriving in the Brazilian city of Manaus handcuffed, while agents in New York have been told to be camera-ready for ICE raids there, and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem live-tweeted a raid.

She also recently announced that the government revoked a decision to protect some 600,000 Venezuelans from deportation. Trump has been using a very old law, designed for world-

war-type scenarios — the 1798 Alien Enemies Act — to detain and deport non-citizens without the typical minimum evidence requirements, due process, or right to appeal. That makes these deportations about identity, race, and nationality, rather than about any kind of law breaking. On top of this, we know he rescinded federal guidance that ICE raids shouldn't take place in sensitive spaces like schools and hospitals, and he expanded express or expedited deportations beyond the border areas and beyond those who had only arrived less than two weeks ago.

### **Criminalisation in order to subjugate**

All this amounts to a systemic dehumanization of the region, in order to lay the ground for increased control and attacks of it, possibly even intervention. It is both a continuation of, and entrenching of the abhorrent treatment by the US towards Latin America, and towards the Global South more broadly— a justification of subjugation.

It is also, of course, a deliberate offensive against those governments that dare, to different extents, be somewhat disobedient of the US and its unreasonable, unfair trade deals, policies, and its transnationals' extensive exploitation, contamination, and resource robbery. This is not new, with the White House using crippling and cruel sanctions to try to break uncooperative countries like Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. But sometimes that toxicity is cleverly disguised in either fake diplomacy, or excuses about the nature of the governments of those countries (while the US then materially supports genocide). Criminalizing Latin America is a material and ideological strategy for disempowering it, while asserting the US's so-called superiority, to then use that for later power plays (economic, or with troops) and furthering injustice.

The mainstream media is right by his side, repeating Trump's use of terms like “illegal migration” without questioning them, and without using terms that are actually technically correct. They are actively contributing to the normalization of racism towards people that are forced to migrate and denied safe routes to do so.

The real criminals (the proponents of racism and sexism, the active destroyers of the planet, the builders and users of bombs, the manufacturers of inequality and poverty) making the oppressed out to be criminals, is a narrative and program that has been employed ad nauseam. The perpetrators of violence put that characteristic onto their victims. The colonized somehow become the invaders. Rather than US imperialism culturally, economically, and politically dominating Latin America — including its backing of recent right-wing coups, it is Latin American migrants who are depicted as “invading” the US.

The story is upside-down and must be countered. Offensives like this can also often lead to increased organizing and activism. It is possible that attacks all over the place could bring the recipients of such attacks (from Latinxs and Palestinians through to women and trans and non-binary people, workers, and environmental activists) closer together, with a common basis for more united struggles and deeper solidarity.

FEBRUARY 5, 2025

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