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Russian Influence Campaigns in Latin America

By Douglas Farah and Román D. Ortiz



A mural of Russian president Vladimir Putin and late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez is seen in Caracas, Venezuela, on April 2, 2022. (Photo by Matias Delacroix/AP)

Contents

Introduction	3
Historical Background	5
Strategic Framework	6
The Information Ecosystem	9
Weaponizing Ideas	19
The Impact of Information Operations in Latin America	23
Conclusion and Recommendations	27

Summary

- Moscow's ongoing disinformation campaigns, part of its global efforts to restore Russia's former status and counter the US-led Western liberal order, have found fertile ground in Latin America.
- Russia has exploited distrust of the United States by characterizing the latter as intent on resource extraction and endorsing economic policies poorly suited to Latin America, offering Russia as a friendly, less intrusive alternative.
- Successful information operations amplify Russian messaging through Russia-allied media platforms and networks of influential actors, including journalists, social media influencers, diplomats, and intellectuals from both the right and the left.
- Russia's disinformation campaigns in Latin America, which have been active since early in Vladimir Putin's presidency, increased around Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. Their effect can be seen in shifting public opinion and in the reluctance of Latin American countries to provide matériel to Ukraine or to participate in sanctions on Russia.
- The United States is not without friends and allies in the region, however, and several paths remain open to bolster relations in a part of the world critical to US strategic interests.



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**CONFLICT
ANALYSIS &
PREVENTION**

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report attempts to establish a baseline understanding of Russian influence operations in Latin America, including the scope, impact, and implementation strategies of these undertakings. The report also offers US policymakers recommendations on how to push back, in a time of limited resources, on Russia's broad expansion efforts in Latin America. Research was supported by the United States Institute of Peace.

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Russian foreign affairs minister Sergey Lavrov, right, and Mexican foreign affairs secretary Marcelo Ebrard exchange signed cooperation documents after meeting in Moscow on April 28, 2021. (Photo by Yuri Kochetkov/pool photo via AP)

Introduction

Since Vladimir Putin took office as Russia’s head of state in 2000, Moscow has created a diverse ecosystem of information, disinformation, and misinformation with interlocking dimensions and global reach as part of its national security apparatus.¹ The activity of this information ecosystem increased substantially around two inflection points, Russia’s seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The formation of such an ecosystem owed in part to Putin’s view of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a cataclysmic event.² For Russia to take its rightful place as a global power, in Putin’s view, it must reclaim its historical and cultural primacy over strategically vital former Soviet states that Russia considers its “near abroad” and maintain a robust Russian presence in Latin America, regarded by Kremlin strategists as a key region of US influence.³

This information operations ecosystem, understood as “a set of institutions designed to influence the activities of diverse actors in the global information space,” is active in Latin America today, where Moscow is attempting to counterbalance the paramount US influence in the region by painting US interests as exclusively exploitative and irredeemably extractionist, and supportive of repressive regimes when it suits global US hegemonic interests.⁴ The information operations space is one front in Moscow’s permanent war with the West and part of a personal hunt by Putin to craft an axis of power that could oppose the US-led Western liberal order.

Over the past decade, a period roughly coinciding with increasing Russian focus on absorbing Ukraine back into Russia’s ambit, the information operations in Latin America have sharpened and broadened. In 2013, Moscow declared its relations with Latin America to be of strategic importance, and the following year, during which Russia illegally seized the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, Moscow started to greatly expand its information warfare efforts in Latin America.⁵ On August 15, 2022—six months after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine—Putin noted the “historically strong, friendly, truly trusting ties” with Latin America.⁶

Since 2013, Russia has created a diversified, sophisticated information ecosystem in Latin America that continues to allow Moscow to significantly shape the region’s information environment through persistent, multiplatform anti-US and antidemocratic messaging. This creates an alternative reality that has taken hold much more broadly and deeply than is generally understood. The information ecosystem targets multiple audiences across a broad ideological spectrum by leveraging Russia’s limited but influential Latin American alliances—and those of friendly nations such as Iran—to weaken US influence, strengthen authoritarianism, and create the perception that Russia has a strong international network of allies, even in a region dominated by the United States.

The relatively low-cost, high-return information operations have had a significant impact in Latin America. Only one country, Costa Rica, has supported US efforts to impose economic sanctions on Russia, even though Latin America is an arena of primary US influence. Conversely, in January 2023, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, Russia’s most important ally in the region, promoted Moscow’s top priority in Latin America: the formation of a new Latin American bloc, composed of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, to help create the “multipolar, multicentric world our elder brother Vladimir Putin” has advocated for.⁷ Maduro said he crafted the proposal for a new alliance of continental Latin American and Caribbean nations after consulting Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Argentine president Alberto Fernández, and Colombian president Gustavo Petro, heads of three of the region’s most important countries, which have historically been strong allies of the United States but are now friendly to Russia.

During the Cold War, multiple Soviet-allied armed revolutions arose in Latin America, triumphing in Cuba and Nicaragua, while pro-Soviet political movements and parties proliferated, largely in reaction to US support for dictatorships and repressive economic models. Legacy movements from those days—favorably disposed toward Moscow and against the United States—remain active across the region. The terms “multipolar world”—often linked with “anti-colonialism”—and “anti-interventionism” are historically resonant tropes among many Latin American political elites who sought strategic autonomy in the Cold War through nonalignment with either the United States or the USSR. Just as the Soviet Union did, Russia portrays itself as a benign or friendly alternative to the United States and the existing world order, despite breaching the most basic principles of international law, such as nonintervention in sovereign countries’ affairs and nonaggression. Historical relationships, ideological affinity, and a history of populist authoritarianism help explain why some Latin American countries are receptive to Moscow’s nationalist and anti-imperialist, anti-US messaging.

For its part, Russia views its information operations globally as one tool in its permanent hybrid war with the West. Examining the issue with an understanding of the Russian geopolitical

perspective aids greatly in understanding how and why Russia is operating in Latin America and why its information operations are viewed by Moscow as strategically important.

METHODS

This report examines Russia's strategic interests, objectives, and tactics in Latin America by exploring its use of media platforms, key influencers, and institutions to advance a coordinated, persistent, asymmetrical campaign to expand Moscow's influence in the region. The research methods included field research conducted in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico; interviews with a wide range of experts; and extensive reviews of the literature in Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, including foundational doctrinal documents on Russian strategic interests in Latin America issued by the Kremlin.

Complementing these sources, the study used the proprietary open-source data-mining tools of Constella Intelligence to analyze Russian digital and social media narratives as a means of better understanding the coordinated messaging that limns the United States as the primary enemy of Latin America while casting Russia as seeking to break this "unipolar hegemony" through alliances with radical populist leaders who share that goal.

From this foundation, the report examines Russian influence campaigns from the perspective of Russia's overt (stated) objectives, covert (unstated) interests and objectives, and alliances across the political spectrum that amplify the impact of the information operations. The results are intended to provide policymakers and practitioners with a more comprehensive understanding of the Kremlin's multifaceted activities in the region, which are often significantly underestimated in scope, complexity, and impact. The report concludes by offering recommendations for how US policymakers can begin to push back against expanding Russian influence in Latin America to mitigate its impacts on US national security interests, stability, and democratic governance.

Historical Background

The collapse of the Soviet Union is regarded by Vladimir Putin as a historically catastrophic event that Russia must rectify. Carrying out this agenda extends beyond attempting to exercise control over former Soviet states, which comprise the geographic space Russia defines as its "near abroad," where it holds that it has both the natural right and the strategic need to maintain primacy. Rather, Russia is engaging in a concerted effort to restore its former status as a global power. As part of this campaign, Russia has increased its focus on maintaining a robust presence in Latin America, viewed by Kremlin strategists as a key region of US influence and an area where old alliances can successfully challenge US dominance.⁸

Russia has long tried to exploit the historically problematic relations between the United States and Latin America. The long US history of direct interference in the region's politics, economic exploitation, and support for dictatorships, justified by the Monroe Doctrine, created a deep regional distrust of US motives and narratives.⁹ During the Cold War and its proxy conflicts, the rejection of repressive and economically regressive regimes supported by the United States helped spark successful armed revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua, supported by the Soviet Union. Both countries are still allied with Russia and are themselves among the region's most

Economic and political crises in much of Latin America helped make public opinion receptive to the authoritarian, ultraconservative, and nationalistic themes promulgated by Russian influence campaigns.

repressive regimes. The rejection of the US presence also contributed to the formation of many other armed groups that did not ultimately take power by military means.

The election of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in 1998 and his 2004 creation of the radical populist Bolivarian Alliance with Cuban leader Fidel Castro, coupled with the ascent of Putin in Russia, created a new dynamic for Moscow.¹⁰ Chávez and his allies displaced much of the traditional left in Latin America and identified the United States as the region's primary enemy while embracing a radical populist authoritarianism.

US strategic objectives since the Cold War have shifted from fighting communism to creating a region of stable democratic nation-states that adhere to the rule of law, are reliable trade partners, and are strong strategic security partners in fighting extra-regional threats and transnational organized crime.¹¹ The Bolivarian movement shifted much of the region from engagement with the United States and its post-Cold War interests to alliances with countries and groups that viewed the United States as a hegemonic empire intent on resource extraction. Russia, growing increasingly authoritarian and anti-Western under Putin, became a natural Bolivarian ally.

This problematic and often bitter history, coupled with Latin America's own history of authoritarian populist and highly personal *caudillo* governance, or strongman leadership, created conditions ripe for amplifying the impact of Russian disinformation campaigns among broad sectors of the Latin American public.¹²

Subsequent economic and political crises in much of Latin America helped make public opinion receptive to the authoritarian, ultraconservative, and nationalistic themes promulgated by Russian influence campaigns. LAPOP's comprehensive biennial Pulse of Democracy survey found that in 2021, support for democracy in the region had fallen to 61 percent (down from 68 percent in 2004) and that tolerance for "executive coups," whereby presidents usurp legal guarantees, "ha[d] grown significantly."¹³

Strongly pro-US constituencies also exist across Latin America. Anti-US sentiment rises and falls, as evidenced by the swings from right-wing leaders to left-wing and back again, while support for *caudillismo* is far from homogeneous or dominant.¹⁴ However, this complex patchwork of attitudes and interwoven histories can be manipulated and redirected through strategic "sharp power" strategies, and Russia has taken this course.¹⁵

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Strategic Framework

Russia's strategic framework for conducting information operations is rooted conceptually in an influential political-philosophical stream of thought and expressed in doctrinal warfighting strategies developed and adhered to by Russian military and political leadership for the past three decades.

Russia's information operations in Latin America increased around two temporal nodes, the 2014 seizure of Crimea and, even more markedly, the February 2022 start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Both military operations represent part of Vladimir Putin's effort to oppose the US-led liberal world order with a competing Eurasian axis led by Russia and China. Moscow's

influence campaigns in Latin America have been a step toward swaying global public opinion and support toward Moscow, or at least against the United States.

The ideological underpinnings of Moscow's reactionary posture emerged within just a few years of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and have profoundly influenced Russia's global activities since then. A key Russian intellectual force in the Russia–Latin America nexus is Aleksandr Gelyevich Dugin, whose influential 1997 book, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, modernized the Russia-centric doctrine of Eurasianism, which mixes mystical nationalism, conservative Russian Orthodox theology, and fascism. Dugin, whose Eurasianism deeply influenced Russian nationalist thinking and the forces that Putin mobilized to support the 2014 takeover of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has a small but influential following in Latin America's intellectual community.¹⁶

Dugin advocates for a sophisticated, nonmilitary program of “subversion, destabilization, and disinformation” in Latin America as a means of disrupting the current geopolitical order and hastening the collapse of the United States.¹⁷ This strategy rests on identifying a common enemy, the United States, and defining it as the region's hegemonic power, along with NATO countries more broadly (see box 1).

Dugin's influential take on Eurasianism meshes with the foundational Primakov doctrine, articulated in 1996 by one-time prime minister, foreign minister, and head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Yevgeny Primakov.¹⁸ This doctrine rests on five guiding principles, which remain in place under Putin: Russia must be an indispensable actor on the world stage; a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable; Russia must strive for a multipolar world managed by Russia and other major powers to counterbalance US unilateral power; Russia must insist on primacy in the post-Soviet space (its near abroad); and Russia must oppose NATO expansion.¹⁹ These tenets, together with Dugin's political-philosophical framing, have undergirded Putin's major foreign policy decisions for almost 30 years.

The modern concept of warfighting that operationalizes the Primakov doctrine was articulated in 2013 by General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of Russia and commander of Russian operations in Ukraine. Gerasimov holds that modern warfighting necessitates a hybrid or nonlinear response involving a changing combination of multiple, largely offensive forms of fighting, including the use of both hard and soft weapons such as information operations. Gerasimov has said that “new challenges require rethinking the forms and modes of warfare” to identify ones that are highly adaptable to the circumstances.²⁰

The strategic process that guides the ongoing adaptation of a nonlinear response includes feedback loops, and the hybrid warfare battlefield is continually monitored abroad by embassy staff, journalists, intelligence officers, and collaborators.²¹ In this effort, Russia-aligned media in Latin America have a large role to play by repeating and amplifying Moscow's messages on influential and popular communication channels.

INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND THE MEDIA

Soviet, and now Russian, subversive operations have always employed a fifth-column strategy, using institutions and individuals, witting or unwitting, within the enemy society, often piggybacking on existing grievances or genuine concerns.

BOX 1.

Aleksandr Dugin and the ideology of Russia-centric Eurasianism

Aleksandr Dugin is well-known in Russia for his nationalism, embrace of the conservative wing of the Russian Orthodox Church, and ties to the European far right.^a The ties are based on a shared, deeply conservative social outlook, including anti-immigration and anti-globalization views. In Latin America, as in Western Europe and the United States, he has a small but influential following for his philosophical blend of inward-looking ultra-nationalism, admiration for fascist leaders, racial supremacy, antisemitism, and a deep sense of grievance against the US-led post-Cold War liberal world order.^b

In Dugin's form of Eurasianism, far-right authoritarian populists such as Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil are regarded as allies in the fight against globalization, ethnic integration, and immigration, while the United States is considered the epicenter of anti-traditional values for championing LGBTQ+ rights, multiculturalism, and diversity, which are viewed as new forms of imperialism, moral rot, and destabilization imposed by Washington.

Dugin has visited Latin America numerous times from 2014 to 2017 and speaks Spanish and Portuguese well enough to give long media interviews. Several of his identified adherents are posted to Russian embassies in Latin America. Dugin's works, such as *The Fourth Political Theory*, are still studied in military academies and universities in Russia and have a wide audience in Latin American intellectual circles, particularly in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. He served as a department head at Moscow State University, and as of 2023, Dugin's website was operating in 44 languages. Western journalists have described him as "Putin's favorite philosopher" for his marked influence on the Russian president's worldview.^c

Notes

- a. Dugin's daughter and acolyte, Darya Dugina, was killed by a car bomb on August 20, 2022—an attack some believe had Dugin as its intended target because of his ideological influence.
- b. In Dugin's view, Iran is a natural ally because it has preserved its historical and religious identity while fighting the United States, providing the strategic rationale for overlapping, coordinated information operations between Russia and Iran in Latin America. See Douglas Farah and Alexa Tavares, "Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, 'Super Spreaders,' and Alternative Narratives," *Strategic Perspectives* 34, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, June 2021, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>.
- c. For details of Dugin's career and monikers, see Chace A. Nelson, "Putin's Playbook: Reviewing Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*," *The Strategy Bridge*, May 28, 2020, www.thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/5/28/putins-playbook-reviewing-dugins-foundations-of-geopolitics.

The widespread use of unqualified, Russia-backed "experts" interviewed on prominent Russia-aligned TV shows, academic fellow travelers, and conspiracy theory groups that undertake their own propaganda activities are key to Russian information operations, in which disinformation is viewed as a tool to further strategic objectives. Margarita Simonyan, head of the state-owned conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) and RT, compared the media group to a defense ministry, noting that "the absence of a foreign [media] channel that is yours is similar to the absence of a defense ministry. When there is no war, such a ministry seems not

to be necessary. But when there is a war, the role of the defense ministry becomes critical. And you cannot create an army a week before the beginning of the war.”²²

Ownership of a global media conglomerate is a form of power, and the key components of the “army” in Simonyan’s simile are RT and Sputnik News (owned by Rossiya Segodnya), both with expanding and influential Spanish-language services. Not only do their operations receive guaranteed funding as part of Putin’s designated “strategic enterprises related to Russian information,” they also benefit from coordinating their operations with those of other state actors, including Russian embassies in Latin America.²³

On September 5, 2022, Putin took another step in formally endorsing the concept of Russia’s so-called humanitarian policy—broadly meaning any Russian activity—abroad, focusing on mass media and the development of the “new media” as part of “the most effective tool of ‘soft power’ concepts . . . providing information support for various Russian humanitarian events.”²⁴

In the Russian model of hybrid or nonlinear warfare, military and nonmilitary actions, including information operations, are synchronized, incorporating key principles of war as detailed in Russian strategic doctrine.²⁵ Russia-aligned media in Latin America are deeply embedded in the execution of this nonlinear warfare, and information operations are a staple of their offerings.

The Information Ecosystem

To achieve its often-underappreciated level of success in Latin America, Russia has built a broad and diverse information operations environment that relies on Spanish-language Russian state media, Latin American state media, social media allies, and websites that align with Russia on key narratives, integrating these messages and platforms into cyber echo chambers that amplify the message. This series of echo chambers is used by actors—almost all experienced and disciplined “super-spreaders” of disinformation—to push the Russian narratives far beyond what is traditionally measured in studies of Russian influence.²⁶ In doing so, the super-spreaders have transformed the Latin American media landscape. A few examples illustrate how the system works.

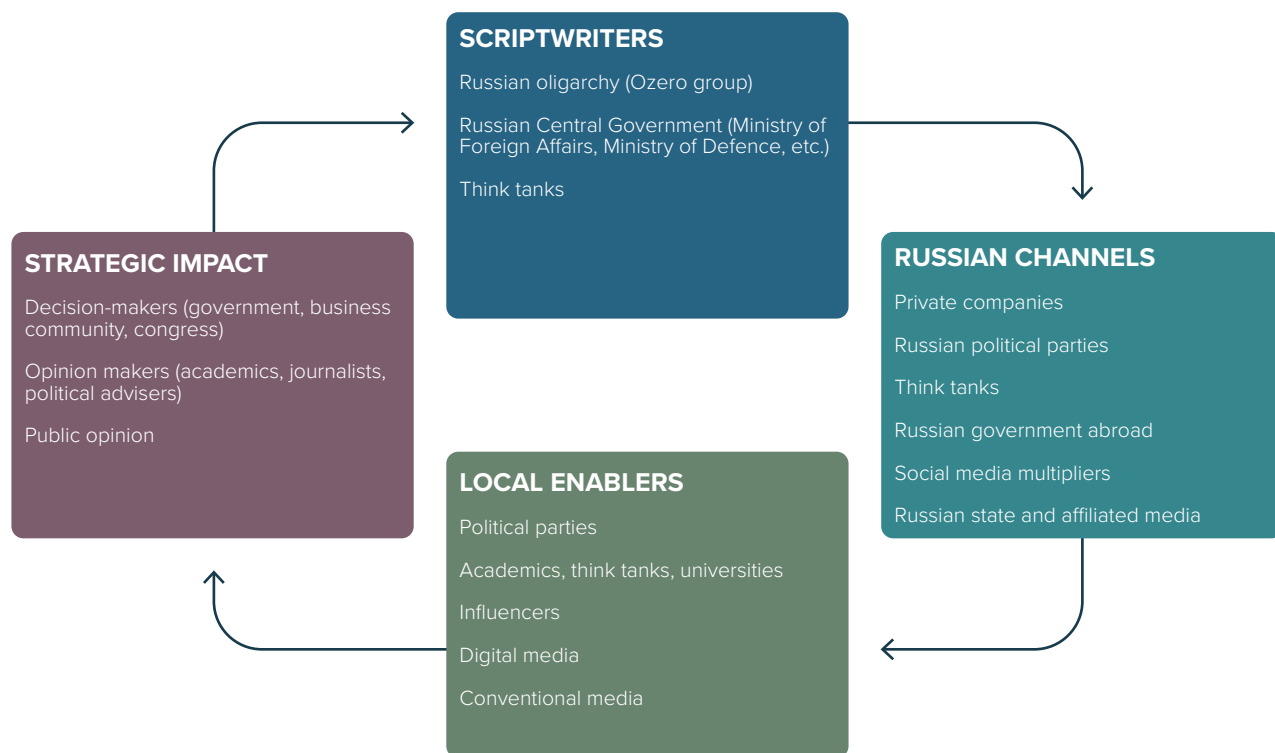
THE PRODUCERS: THE DISINFORMATION FACTORY

Successful Russian information operations require teams to craft the narratives and disseminators to adapt the messaging to target audiences and package it in a way that resonates with them. Although the radical populist governments of the Bolivarian Alliance are Russia’s natural allies in Latin America, along with kindred governments in Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico, Russian information operations encompass a broader ideological coalition, and Russia successfully differentiates its messengers and messaging in order to find allies across the political spectrum without creating visible contradictions (see figure 1).

In Latin America, Actualidad RT (formerly Russia Today in Spanish and the largest Russian media outlet) and Sputnik Mundo are the key outlets for the deployment of Russian state media. Russia’s TV broadcasting in Spanish started in 2009 and expanded greatly following the 2014 occupation of Crimea. In many places, Russian state media outlets are viewed as legitimate news sources and alternatives to the mainstream national, US, and European media.

FIGURE 1.

The Russian information ecosystem in Latin America



One former employee of Actualidad RT described the modus operandi of the network as follows.²⁷ The correspondents, scriptwriters, and news presenters receive direct guidelines on the most important topics, but staff members do not have to ask for guidance for each specific story because the narratives follow “generally understood values and aims of the channel.” Since most Actualidad RT correspondents and anchors have been working at the broadcaster or at affiliated outlets for many years, they clearly understand the rules of the game.

Hard data on the size of the Russian media audience in Latin America are sparse, but Actualidad RT is available in every country on various platforms, including basic TV channels, its own website, and, prior to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, YouTube. Since the invasion, YouTube has deplatformed both Actualidad RT’s and Sputnik Mundo’s exclusive channels. The two outlets’ official Twitter accounts and those of the more prominent members of both channels were labeled “media affiliated with the Russian government,” but those labels have since been removed.

Some data indicate that Russian media outlets have continued to perform well after the invasion of Ukraine.²⁸ Actualidad RT maintains its presence on Facebook and has 17 million followers, and RT Play (focused on “lighter” news and humor for propaganda purposes) had almost 6.3 million followers as of June 14, 2023. The Actualidad RT Spanish-language Twitter account had 3.4 million followers on the same date. Its Spanish-language website had 13.9 million visitors in

November 2022. Almost half the views were from Venezuela (19.2 percent), Mexico (15.1 percent), and Argentina (14.3 percent).²⁹ New pages continue to appear, and though Russian media are known to buy followers and otherwise enhance numbers, they are important players.³⁰ Although some content-sharing agreements have been canceled, Actualidad RT has developed others, and its programming is attractive because of its high quality.³¹

Comparing the audiences for Russian media and Western news outlets is difficult because one group of outlets is owned, operated, and directed by the state while the other group consists largely of independent, for-profit, private media companies. Consequently, the objectives, strategies, resource allocation, and purposes of the enterprises differ significantly.

However, there are some indicators. According to Constella data, among the top 100 Twitter influencers in the mass protests in Chile and Colombia in 2019, Actualidad RT ranked ninth in Chile and second in Colombia. The Western broadcaster with the highest ranking was Germany's Deutsche Welle in Spanish, at 47th in Chile and 44th in Colombia. TeleSur, Russian media's foremost surrogate, ranked 77th among Colombian influencers and 26th among Chilean influencers. The official US Voice of America, the outlet closest to the US government, did not appear in the top 100.

There are multiple indications that Actualidad RT has become embedded in the regional media landscape. In December 2022, three of its staff were awarded prizes for international coverage of Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine by the prestigious Club de Periodistas de México (Mexican Press Club). The Russian ambassador to Mexico attended the ceremony and said the prizes "support our struggle against terrorism."³²

The success of Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo owes in large part to their ability to leverage alliances and deliver content to a broad network of disseminators across multiple Latin American platforms, which greatly increases their audience reach and their credibility. The alliances created and cultivated a group of highly influential Latin American and Russian super-spreaders to promote a common set of narratives across these platforms, targeting a range of audiences with identical messages and information.³³ These influencers in turn provide content to a network of traditional media platforms, social media platforms, and thousands of websites that link to each other with posts echoing Russian-Bolivarian narratives.³⁴

THE LATIN AMERICAN MEDIA NETWORK

No medium has been more important as a force of legitimization of Russian narratives, an amplifier of its messaging, and a carrier of direct Russian content—often without identifying it as such—as TeleSur, the regional network established by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez in 2005. TeleSur is owned by the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, and other nations (the composition of the state owners has varied over time). TeleSur not only hosts super-spreaders and content that also appears on Actualidad RT (and some also on HispanTV, the Spanish-language satellite station of the Iranian regime) but also is linked to a network of websites that support the joint Russian-Bolivarian narratives and messages.

While there are publicly announced content-sharing agreements between Actualidad RT and at least nine media outlets, including TeleSur, there is no public information on the agreements' parameters except that the content is free.³⁵ There is at least one additional agreement with Sputnik Mundo.³⁶

FIGURE 2.

Russia in Latin American Media



Most of the sites that push Russian-Bolivarian narratives curated on TeleSur, such as the Colombia-based Agencia Prensa Rural, are public-facing with Spanish content but also host content in multiple languages, including Russian. Others, like Red Nacional y Popular (Nac&Pop) and Página Transversal, provide a platform for anti-US criticism citing Dugin’s anti-globalist and nationalist writing, including announcing the translation of Dugin’s *Against the West* into Portuguese in Brazil.³⁷ A small but important element of the network is HispanTV, on which several of the main content providers at TeleSur share the same content (see figure 2).

THE DISSEMINATORS: TOP INFLUENCERS SPREADING RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES

This discussion looks at the examples of three super-spreaders with hundreds of thousands of followers. They are representative of the new wave of propagandists who tailor their messaging to push Russian talking points on platforms whose reach overlaps with platforms used by the radical populist left of Latin America that is allied with Russia. The super-spreaders operate on diverse media and social media platforms and are connected through Russia-friendly media outlets. They often promote one another on their own platforms. (The case of Alexis Castillo,

who died while fighting for Russia in Ukraine, is also a lesson in how the Russian propaganda cycle operates. See box 2 for a discussion of this case.)

Pablo Jofré Leal is a Chilean national whose online presence epitomizes the super-spreader paradigm. He appears as a correspondent for Actualidad RT, HispanTV, Islam Oriente, and TeleSur, where he has an influential blog. Jofré produces content for different media outlets using identical language.³⁸ His reporting is often supported by a secondary source that is actually his work for another outlet—without disclosure that it is the same person reporting the same information. This is a typical post by Jofré on TeleSur and HispanTV that is aligned with Moscow’s talking points on the war on Ukraine:

Efforts by the West, led by Washington and NATO, its military wing, to blame all the world’s economic, food and energy problems on Russia’s special operation to de-Nazify and demilitarize Ukraine are based on no facts to support this accusation. . . . Fake news is generating an extremely dangerous cycle of manipulation and disinformation to discredit Russia and create unfavorable opinions about Russia, its leaders and its people.³⁹

Inna Afinogenova is the best known of the Russian nationals opining on Latin American issues, having spent more than 12 years promoting the Kremlin’s geopolitical narrative through a high-profile channel on RT.⁴⁰ To her 500,000 social media followers and millions of viewers, she is notable for her biting commentary promoting the narrative of a common Russian–Latin American global vision in flawless Spanish, often using sarcasm and humor to make her points.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Afinogenova’s popular RT program, *Ahi les va (There You Go)*, was deplatformed from Western social media. After leaving RT, she returned to broadcasting a few months later with a personal YouTube channel.⁴¹ Rather than directly take pro-Russian positions, she now “cultivates a style that is very popular with conspiracy theorists,” according to one analyst. “Its most important stylistic elements are claims like ‘they don’t want you to know this’ and ‘I’m going to tell you something now that you won’t see in the mainstream media,’” leading to the appearance of open-minded inquisitiveness.⁴² Afinogenova’s rising profile and her close relationship with Pablo Iglesias (discussed below) position her as a crucial influencer in Latin American media networks.

Pablo Iglesias Turrión is the face of the Bolivarian alliance in Spain, promoter of Russian-language talking points, former deputy prime minister of Spain, and co-founder of the far-left party Podemos (We Can). He has been a fixture on TeleSur, HispanTV, and, to a lesser degree, Actualidad RT, serving as a sort of cultural interpreter among the Bolivarian bloc, the European hard left, Russian influencers, and Iranian messengers.⁴³

After losing in the regional elections in Madrid in 2021, Iglesias abandoned politics and shifted to media engagement, initially through his podcast *La Base*, where Afinogenova has appeared on at least 60 of the 143 episodes published through June 2023. This program, which aired four times a week on YouTube and had 561,000 followers, echoed pro-Russian content published on other influencer platforms, including analysis of the war in Ukraine that repeated the Kremlin’s talking points. More recently, Iglesias has developed a new Spain-based television channel, Canal Red. Afinogenova is co-hosting programs on this new channel, and it is now broadcasting *La Base*.⁴⁴

BOX 2.

Alexis Castillo: Influencer in the disinformation system

The case of Alexis Castillo provides a lesson in how influencers develop and package information, and how that information is then disseminated across the major media platforms to achieve high-level influence.

Castillo became a prominent figure in the RT propaganda network beginning in 2015, when the Colombian-Spanish national appeared as one of the main narrators in an RT documentary-style film on the growing hostilities between Russia and Ukraine. Castillo was reportedly killed by Ukrainian troops on October 28, 2022, while fighting on the side of Russian troops in the town of Peski.^a He has since been portrayed as a martyr for Russia and called a hero, and his story is used to show that Russia has international allies. In the 2015 film, Castillo said he had gone to the Donbas region in 2014 after the “coup d’état” in Kyiv and had fought against imperialism ever since.^b Castillo also said he was a Colombian who had moved to Spain when he was 10 years old and had spent much of his life in different antifascist movements.^c

After his death, multiple sympathetic media outlets published emotional obituaries and tributes, eulogizing and mythologizing him.^d The life of the narrative as it spread across Russian-affiliated media is illustrative, with RT tweeting on October 28, 2022, describing Castillo as “an international brigade member, a militant of the left and antifascism in Spain who decided to take up the armed struggle in 2014.”^e On October 29, Colombian president Gustavo Petro retweeted an RT comment to his 6.4 million followers, adding, “A young man who wanted to be a revolutionary has died. Revolution is peace. This won’t be published by our media.” That same day, Actualidad RT published a story on Petro’s tweet about Castillo.^f

Notes

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- b. Los Informantes, “Desde la trinchera: El colombiano que lucha con los rebeldes ucranianos,” YouTube video, May 10, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9WjRamke4M, now unavailable in the United States. Much of the same information is available at Infobae, “La historia de Alexis Castillo, el colombiano que murió en la guerra entre Rusia y Ucrania,” October 29, 2022, www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/10/29/la-historia-de-alexis-castillo-el-colombiano-que-murio-en-la-guerra-entre-rusia-y-ucrania.
- c. Requeijo, “La Guerra de Alexis.”
- d. RT en Español (@ActualidadRT), “Muere el héroe de un documental de RT. Alexis Castillo, el héroe del documental de RT ‘Los extranjeros de Donbass’, murió bajo bombardeos . . .,” Twitter, October 28, 2022, www.twitter.com/ActualidadRT/status/1586108043871199233.
- e. Helena Villar (@HelenaVillarRT), “Ha caído en combate en el Donbás, Alexis, brigadista internacional. Militante de izquierdas y antifascista en España, decidió tomar las armas en 2014. Así contó su historia en un documental de RT en Español,” Twitter, October 28, 2022, www.twitter.com/HelenaVillarRT/status/1586072220798943233.
- f. Actualidad RT, “‘La revolución es la paz’: Petro se pronuncia sobre la muerte de un joven que luchaba en Donbass,” October 29, 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/446367-muere-alexis-castillo-colombiano-donbass>.

COMMON NARRATIVES

One of the primary goals of Russia’s information operations is to create narratives that reinforce a common global outlook and understanding with potential allies in Latin America while weakening the role of the United States. While important parts of these tactics are designed to justify Russia’s actions in Ukraine, the most important through line is that Russia and its allies share a common enemy: the United States and its purported imposition of a rapacious,

imperialist, extractive agenda on Latin America. These charges lead to a significant amount of whataboutism, whereby atrocities committed by Russian forces are compared to gun violence deaths in the United States, incarceration at Guantánamo, or other societal problems in an attempt to create false parallels. Afinogenova and Jofré are particularly adept at implementing this strategy.

Among the narratives promoted across Russian-language media to local super-spreaders and echo chambers are the following:

- The United States is creating a global food crisis by sanctioning Russian fertilizer and food exports, thereby jeopardizing the fate of the world by causing famine of “biblical proportions” and enabling the United States to reap enormous profits for its food exports.⁴⁵
- US economic embargos against Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Russia’s three main allies in the region, are the primary cause of poverty, mass migration, and humanitarian crises in Latin America.⁴⁶ Russia is now under the same type of inhumane assault because of US global hegemony.⁴⁷
- The United States supports Nazis in Ukraine, and Nazis there commit far worse atrocities than Russian troops. The atrocities include Ukrainian troops cooking and eating the severed heads of dead Russian soldiers and a startup in Kyiv specializing in cakes decorated with the faces of dead Russians.⁴⁸
- The United States supports Nazi measures, such as censoring the media (primarily RT and Sputnik News).⁴⁹
- The primary strategic goal of the United States in Latin America is the extraction of natural resources such as oil, lithium, gold, and fresh water, and in Ukraine it is the extraction of titanium.⁵⁰ The United States cannot tolerate Russia’s inroads in the region, especially in resource-rich nations like Venezuela and Bolivia.⁵¹

In Argentina, the message incorporates the British defeat of Argentina in the 1982 conflict over the disputed Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas in Latin America), holding that Argentina, like Russia, was once a great nation and was robbed of its rightful place in global affairs by a foreign power. Russian media mock Britain’s demands that Russia leave Ukraine by demanding Britain return the Falkland Islands to Argentina.⁵²

THE ROLE OF DIPLOMATIC TOOLS

Russian influence networks link multiple parties, including government entities, state media, private companies, and individuals. Some are connected by formal hierarchical relationships; others are linked by personal relationships or shared interests. The pervasive conflation of private and institutional interests in post-Soviet Russia also extends to these networks, where government officials mix official operations with personal profit.⁵³ The opposite is also true: companies and individuals use their businesses to promote disinformation and gain access to influencers and decision-makers.

Russian embassies are key nodes in these networks, and ambassadors are key players. Russia's top diplomats in Latin America are mostly drawn from a small group of individuals who have worked in the region for years, moving from one position to another across Russian diplomatic missions and maintaining close ties to Moscow's leadership. Unlike the United States, which often fills posts at key embassies in Latin America with political appointees lacking in language skills, political clout, or knowledge of cultural and historical context, the core group of Russian diplomats all speak fluent Spanish or Portuguese and have career ties to senior Russian officials in Moscow.⁵⁴

These ambassadors are active on embassy social media accounts. They often have direct access to traditional media to give interviews and publish articles and engage with universities and think tanks.⁵⁵ These relationships appear to remain resilient even after the widespread condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, the Mexican Chamber of Deputies inaugurated the Mexican-Russian Friendship Group a month after the Russian invasion.⁵⁶ In August 2022, the Colombian House of Representatives celebrated a meeting between its then president, David Racero, and Russian ambassador Nikolay Karlovich Tavdumadze, calling the meeting important to "strengthen ties with different nations."⁵⁷

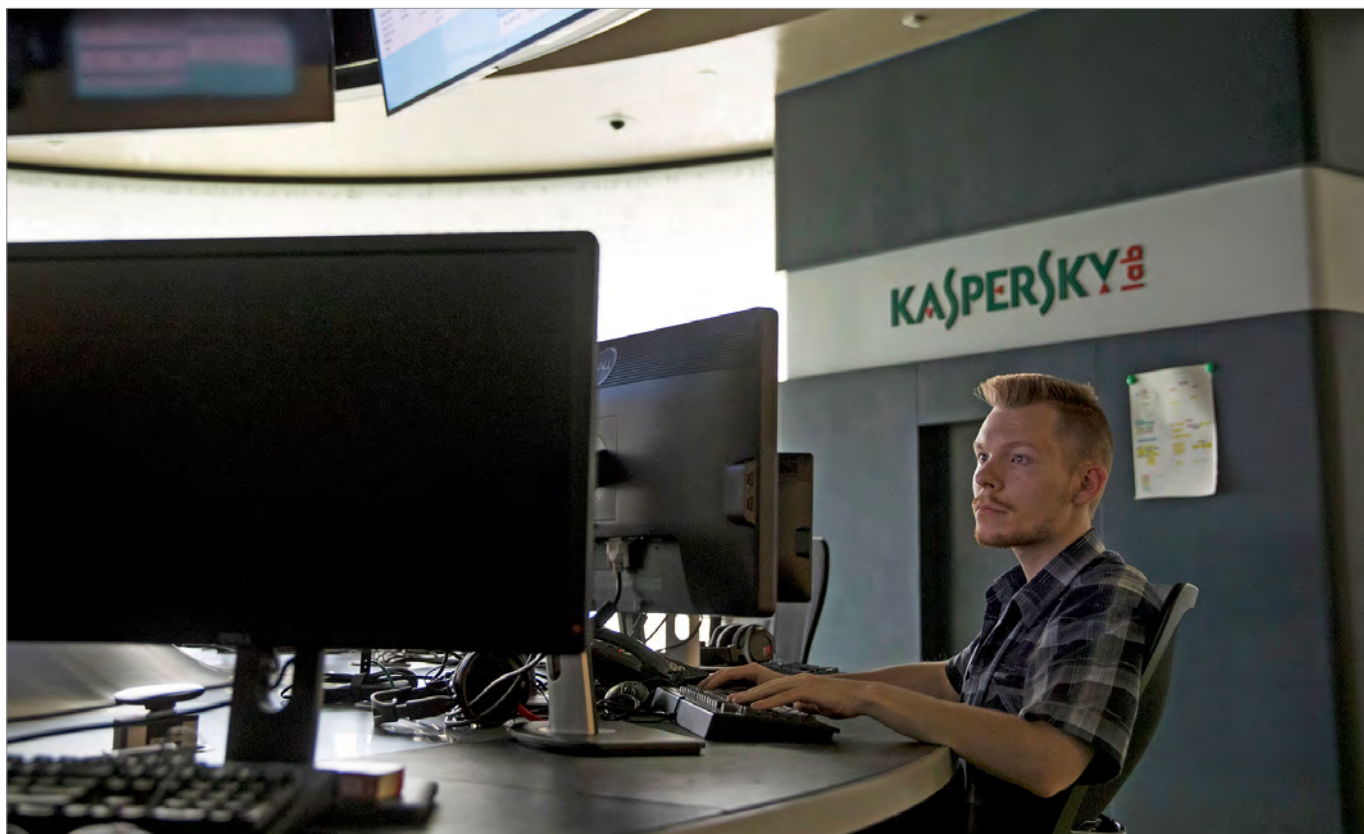
TRADE AND GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS

Russian companies at times play critical roles funding and directing Moscow's political activities in the region, mirroring the behavior of Russian corporations at home. In Bolivia, Rosatom, the Russian company responsible for developing civil nuclear projects, funded a group of political communications specialists connected to Vladimir Tabak, a key contractor for the Kremlin's social media strategy, to support Evo Morales's third presidential campaign.⁵⁸ The specialists left the country before the October 2019 elections, which ended in a political crisis that forced Morales to temporarily flee the country.

Russia also leverages commercial relations to mute criticism, including in countries that might otherwise challenge its authoritarian behavior. Russia supplies about 22 percent of the region's fertilizer needs, giving Putin a powerful lever to nullify US pressure on issues pertaining to Russia.⁵⁹ The two key Russian fertilizer companies supplying Brazil have close ties to Putin's inner circle. The Kremlin's media outlets blame the United States and its Western allies for risking Latin American food security to comply with sanctions.⁶⁰

For example, for Ecuador, a traditional US ally, Russia is the third-largest market for nonoil exports, which total about \$1 billion a year in bananas, shrimp, and flowers.⁶¹ Russia also provides 39 percent of the country's fertilizer. Adhering to US-requested international sanctions would threaten important sectors of Ecuador's economy, and Russian ambassador Vladimir Ivanovich Sprinchan gave interviews to leading Ecuadoran news outlets blaming the West for the war and underscoring Russia's efforts to find ways to maintain trade relations.⁶² President Guillermo Lasso aligned with Washington on UN votes on Ukraine but otherwise stayed silent on Russia's actions and imposed no sanctions.⁶³

Brazil, which faces a looming food insecurity crisis and acute fertilizer shortage, imports more than 30 percent of its fertilizer from Russia. This provided the official justification for former president Jair Bolsonaro's prewar Moscow visit. It was also a major reason why his successor, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who enjoyed a warm relationship with Moscow in his



An employee of Kaspersky Lab works at the company's headquarters in Moscow on July 1, 2017. The firm is a critical cybersecurity provider in Latin America and, as of December 2022, formally part of Moscow's information security structure. (Photo by Pavel Golovkin/AP)

previous presidential term (2003–2010), reached out to Putin right after his electoral victory to “strengthen the relations between our two nations.”⁶⁴

Two companies have emerged from the war in Ukraine with renewed initiatives in Latin America. The most important is Yandex, the Russian provider of internet services, which lost significant global market share after the invasion and pivoted in an effort to penetrate Latin America.⁶⁵ Another Russian tech company, Kaspersky Lab, remains a critical cybersecurity provider in Latin America. The firm is closely affiliated with the Russian government, and the US government cut its access to the US market over fears of intelligence gathering.⁶⁶ In December 2022, Kaspersky joined the Expert Council of the Russian Government, which placed Kaspersky inside Moscow's information security structure.⁶⁷

THE FIGHT FOR THE INTELLIGENTSIA

Moscow has systematically sought influence by approaching universities, think tanks, and other cultural entities, often resulting in harmonized narratives that incorporate the Kremlin's interests into accounts of historical Latin American struggles. The Latin American Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences; the Russian Council of International Affairs; the Casas de Rusia (Russia Houses) in Buenos Aires, Lima, and Mexico City; and the Valdai Club all facilitate these efforts, sometimes coordinating, through the NK SESLA consortium (see box 3), outreach to the business and academic communities.⁶⁸

BOX 3.

The NK SESLA network: Influence operations by other means

One of Russia's most active networks in Latin America is a cluster of companies with overlapping directorships comprising senior Russian intelligence officers and offering an array of surveillance and intelligence equipment. This consortium of companies, not formally affiliated with the Russian state, operates under the umbrella of the Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America (NK SESLA in English, CN Cepla in Spanish), based in Santiago, Chile.

Members of NK SESLA's leadership team also serve as directors of multiple other Russian state cyberwarfare entities. Because of the leaders' seniority and documents authorizing the network to act on behalf of Russian intelligence services and the Russian military, it is likely that NK SESLA's primary purpose is connected to its roots in electronic intelligence, cryptology, and surveillance. Its most visible work includes hosting conferences and training programs in Russia for Latin American businesspeople and the sale of sophisticated surveillance equipment from the Russian state company PROTEI, an IT systems developer.

Among the members of the NK SESLA network is the Central Institute for Information and Communications (TsITiS), an institution charged by Putin in 2016 with the core strategic mission of building a multibillion-dollar integrated, secure communications network for the Russian military. The TsITiS network is now tasked with helping detect and deter cyberattacks.

The first director of NK SESLA, appointed in 1998, was Aleksandr Vladimirovich Starovoitov, who had been a major general in the Soviet army and a senior KGB officer and awarded Russia's highest honorary title, Hero of the Russian Federation. Until his death in July 2021, Starovoitov served simultaneously as director of TsITiS, president of the Russia-Chile Business Council, and director general of a para-state consortium formed to address challenges in creating and developing advanced information technology and computer hardware.

Starovoitov's death was announced prominently in Russian media. Tatiana Mashkova, his deputy at NK SESLA since 2009, was named director and has become a spokesperson for Russia on Latin American issues. In February 2022, she met with Argentine president Alberto Fernández and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro during their trips to Moscow on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine. Since then, Mashkova has hosted dozens of business seminars across Latin America to tout Russian technologies and equipment, as well as scores of tours by Latin American business leaders to Russia, and has made trips to Panama and Cuba.

In Moscow, the Latin American Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences is the primary research institution involved in information operations in Latin America. It provides timely expertise on the region both publicly and in private strategy meetings with Kremlin officials.⁶⁹

These efforts have a visible impact. In November 2022, the Mexican scholar John Ackerman, who served as an adviser to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and is a

professor at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico's largest university, organized an international seminar on media wars with panelists from RT and TeleSur. Inna Afinogenova was the closing speaker.⁷⁰

While some of these relationships deteriorated following the invasion of Ukraine, Russian embassies have redoubled their efforts to reach Latin American educational institutions by promoting educational exchanges. This work has extended from the Autonomous University of Sonora in Mexico to the University of Guayaquil in Ecuador and the National University of La Plata in Argentina.⁷¹

Weaponizing Ideas

Russian state media disinformation and influence campaigns intensified in Latin America after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The amount of current activity is striking when compared with the same type of activity following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. A systematic search using the Meltwater data collection tool found that during 2014 and 2015, Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo published 1,352 entries on Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. In the period between 2021 and 2022, the same Russian state media published 14,744 entries on topics relating to the war. This difference shows the dramatic expansion of Russia's disinformation infrastructure, capabilities, and alliances (see figure 3).

Researchers for this report analyzed Russian disinformation campaigns from two datasets, one derived from conventional media content and the other from social media content. Meltwater's data collection and analysis system was used to process 26,707 entries posted by Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo. Constella Intelligence, a digital analysis research partner, used proprietary software to collect and analyze data from digital media, including Twitter and Facebook.

Apart from the data collected to assess the disinformation in Spanish on the war in Ukraine, the analysis considered three main issue areas: mass protests in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Peru; elections in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico; and geopolitical attitudes. Most of the data were disseminated either by government-controlled news outlets or on social media between 2018 and 2022. For posts related to government-level visits between Russia and Latin America, the datasets included content from 2012 to 2022.

The analysis sought to identify bias and misrepresentations promoted by Russian disinformation messaging to support the Kremlin's objectives in Latin America. To establish how Russian messaging is disseminated to target audiences, the analysis also looked for indicators that the issue areas of interest connected to the ideological corpus promoted by Moscow and for how disinformation circulated.

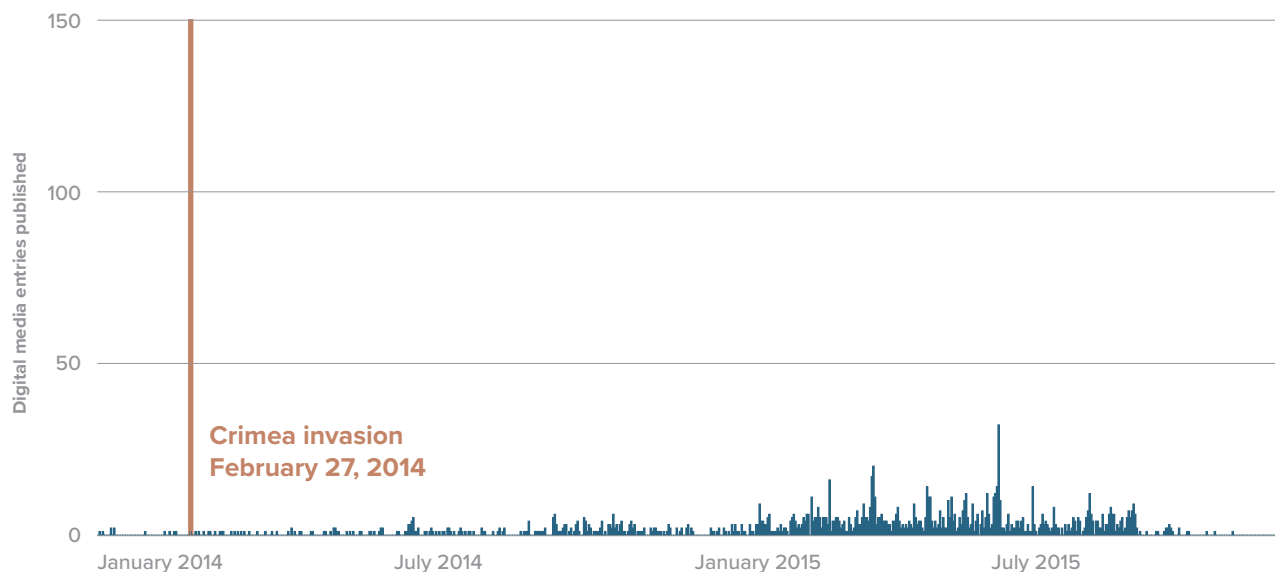
PROTESTS: SOWING ILLEGITIMACY

The Russian disinformation campaigns around mass protests in Latin America provide clear examples of how Moscow leverages local or regional issues to serve its foreign policy objectives. For the purposes of this study, the countries facing violent protests and riots were grouped into those allied with the United States—Chile (2019–2020), Colombia (2019), Ecuador (2022), and Peru (2020)—and those allied with Russia, identified as Nicaragua (2018) and Bolivia (2019).

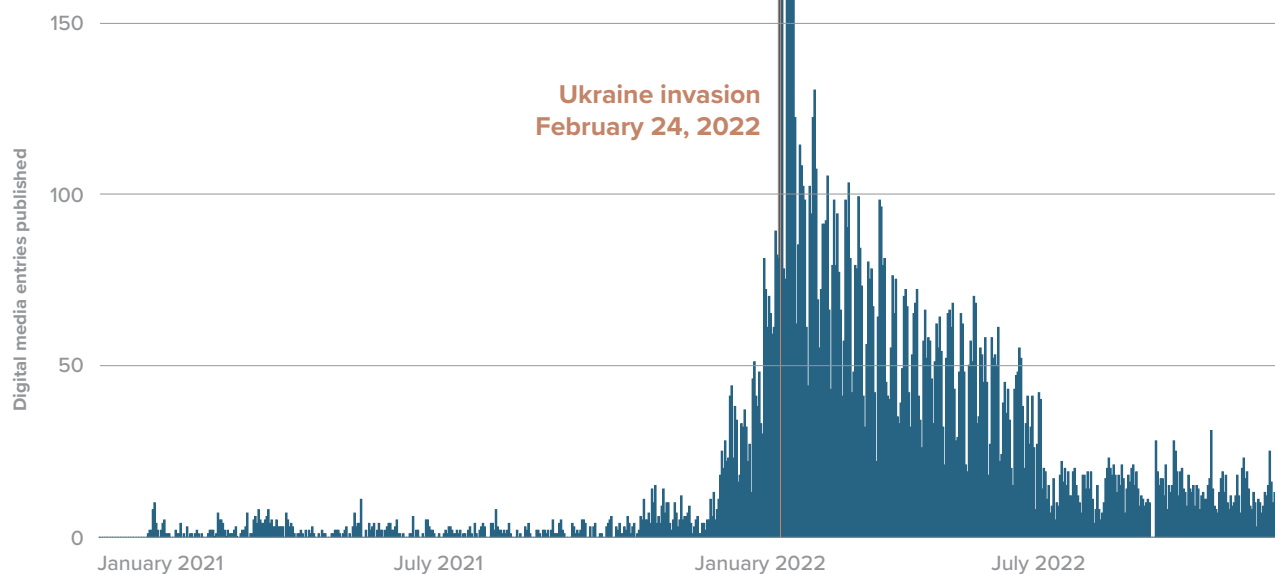
FIGURE 3.

Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo disinformation efforts, 2014–2015 and 2021–2022

EFFORTS AROUND CRIMEA ANNEXATION, 2014–2015



EFFORTS AROUND UKRAINE FULL-SCALE INVASION, 2021–2022



Source: Data from digital media, including Twitter and Facebook, collected and analyzed by Constella Intelligence.

Social unrest in US-allied countries was extensively reported by Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo. During the protest period in Colombia, these media outlets published 310 entries, approximately 6.5 per day; in Chile, they published about 3 entries per day, and in Ecuador, 4.1 entries per day.

Social unrest in countries allied with Russia received much less media attention, even when the protests were far more violent and deadly. In Nicaragua’s violent protests, 351 people were killed between April 18 and July 17, 2018.⁷² Despite this level of unrest, Russian state media tagged the country in only 25 entries (0.3 posts per day). During the Bolivian riots between October 21 and November 21, 2019, there were 42 entries (1.4 per day). The outcomes of social unrest for these two Moscow-aligned governments were more dramatic and impactful than those for the US-allied governments, yet they were almost entirely absent from the Russian narrative.

In Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, the extensive coverage by Russian state media highlighted the perceived unfairness of the social and economic measures that triggered the unrest. In Chile, the unrest was described as a “social explosion” (*estallido social*); in Colombia, the protests were against “tax reform” (*reforma tributaria*); in Ecuador, they were dubbed protests against the unfair “enormous economic package” (*paquetazo económico*); and in Peru, they were against “agrarian promotion” (*promoción agraria*), or limiting the rights of agricultural workers.

The coverage emphasized the negative role of the security forces in handling the protests, mentioning state security frequently and mostly negatively and highlighting the unpopularity of the police (74 percent of mentions conveyed a negative sentiment) and the military (50 percent were negative). The stories also portrayed human rights negatively (65 percent conveyed a negative sentiment regarding the handling of human rights by security forces). The resulting narrative presented riots in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru as the result of government repression of a population facing dramatic and legitimate economic needs.

This narrative was widely disseminated. Constella’s data show that during the peak period of protests in Colombia and Chile, Actualidad RT ranked eighth and ninth in most-shared media in those countries and second and ninth in Twitter’s influence rankings. TeleSur ranked as the 14th and 15th most-shared media source and 77th and 26th in Twitter influence rankings. The highest-ranked Western media in this list ranked 81st in Colombia and 77th in Chile.

Social media postings promoting the narrative were very concentrated, showing a high level of mobilization and behavior indicating the use of bots. The use of bots to disseminate sympathetic content is a common tactic to amplify influence across the digital space by means of only a few automated operators. Of the posts in Colombia, 33 percent were generated by just 1 percent of accounts posting about the topic, and 0.5 percent of the users generated 28 percent of the posts in Chile. In Chile, 0.01 percent of users (241) generated 2.6 percent of total posts (501,795), an average of 260 daily posts. In Colombia, some of the highly engaged users generated up to 1,174 posts in the period November 20–25, 2019. Within these groups of high-activity users, more than 100 accounts posting in both Colombia and Chile were based in Venezuela. These abnormal users disseminated content coming from a set of Chilean and Colombian leftist digital news outlets, as well as from Actualidad RT and TeleSur.

It is critical to distinguish between meddling and its actual impact. There is evidence of Russian interference [in electoral processes] through disinformation campaigns but little evidence that the efforts were decisive for the candidates favored by Moscow.

ELECTION INTERFERENCE: SYSTEMATIC ATTEMPTS, LIMITED EFFECTS

With respect to Russian interference in Latin American electoral processes, it is critical to distinguish between meddling and its actual impact. There is evidence of Russian interference through disinformation campaigns but little evidence that the efforts were decisive for the candidates favored by Moscow.

The case of Mexico's 2018 elections is illustrative. According to Constella's analysis of Twitter and Facebook postings, López Obrador's political campaign dominated the digital public space through a strategy of using bots to disseminate content provided by allied digital media. The digital community associated with López Obrador included 78.3 percent (163 accounts) of the group of extremely high-activity authors. Within this group, 47.8 percent (78 accounts) retweeted more than once per second, and 87.7 percent (142 accounts) were anonymous profiles. In other words, three out of four authors suspected of being bots supported López Obrador's campaign.

Some groups of foreign actors played the role of connectors between the Mexican debate and international media outlets with an anti-Western orientation. For example, 1,293 (0.7 percent) Venezuela-geolocated Twitter authors shared 117 domains 3,136 times between May 14 and June 2, 2018. The shared domains were mainly TeleSur, Iran's HispanTV, and Actualidad RT, all sympathetic to López Obrador.

There was significant overlap between authors sharing Actualidad RT content and authors sharing content in support of López Obrador. In total, 5,793 authors shared Actualidad RT content 7,392 times. Within this group, 61.2 percent of the authors also shared at least one of the most popular pro-López Obrador digital media sources, showing an overlap between the communities. In a digital space crowded by millions of interactions, however, it was not possible for this study's analysts to determine the direct impact of these activities.

The Colombian case shows evidence of Russian interference in the elections with indeterminate impact. The initial concern about potential Russian interference emerged before the May 2018 presidential election, and the Colombian government expelled two Russian diplomats engaged in intelligence activities incompatible with their diplomatic status.⁷³

Russia's interference in the Colombian elections likely included the use of bots. As the elections drew closer, prospects for Gustavo Petro's victory increased and allegations of Petro's proximity to Moscow grew louder.⁷⁴ After Petro's victory, the journalist Matt Taibb published documents reportedly showing that certain accounts were suspicious because of their links with Kremlin operators and their involvement in efforts to improve Petro's image and discredit his rivals.⁷⁵ These accounts were reported to have an unusual level of activity that indicated they were bots likely associated with the Internet Research Agency of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the now deceased head of the Wagner Group and a former Putin ally and propagandist.⁷⁶ However, it is clear the disinformation was not decisive in Petro's victory.

In Brazil, a comparison of the 2018 and 2022 elections shows how Russia mixes pragmatic and ideological approaches in its influence campaigns. Unlike Sputnik, RT does not have a Portuguese-language channel, but Actualidad RT is a useful proxy for the Kremlin's intention toward Brazil since it has a significant presence in surrounding countries.⁷⁷

The coverage of Actualidad RT changed from 2018 to 2022. From September 1 to October 28, 2018, during the presidential campaign pitting Bolsonaro against Fernando Haddad, the Russian news outlet favored Bolsonaro, quoting him 207 times in 136 posts, while Haddad was cited just 77 times in 58 posts. In 2022, however, the coverage of Bolsonaro and Lula was more even. Bolsonaro received 72 mentions in 47 posts and Lula received 116 mentions in 48 posts.

Just a few days before the 2022 election, Putin said, “We consider Brazil our most important partner in Latin America and will do as much as possible to develop this relationship in the future.”⁷⁸ While enjoying a privileged relationship with Bolsonaro, Russia also appeared desirous of maintaining a cordial relationship with Lula, a known friend, and the preference for Bolsonaro’s illiberal populism gave way to a pragmatic rapprochement with Lula. After Lula’s victory, the Russian media moved to praising the opportunities opened by the win.⁷⁹

GEOPOLITICS: PROMOTING ALLIANCES, ATTACKING RIVALS

Russian state media have engaged in a significant effort to promote key tenets of Moscow’s foreign policy and shape regional public opinion. One key theme is the imperative to build a “multipolar” world order, with Russia, China, and other powers as counterweights to the current “unipolar” world dominated by the United States. In a selection of 1,601 posts in Spanish by Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo between 2018 and 2022 that focused on geopolitical issues such as NATO and Russian and US foreign policy, the term “multipolar” was used 264 times, frequently connected with positive concepts such as “order,” “fairness,” and “justice.”

Washington’s unipolar agenda, according to Actualidad RT and Sputnik Mundo, is that of a warmongering bully threatening international peace, a posture that in turn is tied to “supremacy,” “pressure,” and “violations” of both human rights and sovereignty. Russian public diplomacy and media have recently incorporated the terms “colonialism” to describe Western influence and “anticolonialism” to describe why Russia and non-Western countries should forge an alliance against the United States.⁸⁰

The Impact of Information Operations in Latin America

Assessing the impact of Russia’s efforts in Latin America’s information space is challenging. These operations flow alongside other important and organic social, economic, and political factors, making it difficult to disaggregate their direct consequences. Together these factors have radically reshaped Latin America, driving a new, illiberal wave across the political spectrum and significantly weakening US influence. Russian information operations are an important part of this regional transformation in times of extreme social and economic stress. They amplify legitimate social issues, economic difficulties, the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and historical inequality while blaming liberal democratic institutions—part of the unipolar world—for the failures.

While Moscow’s mass media efforts not only aim to influence public opinion, they also target decision-makers with narrower messaging. Insofar as a primary goal is to undermine the United

Public disapproval of the invasion hides key factors that may create opportunities for Russian disinformation campaigns that have an impact on public perception.

States, delegitimize liberal democratic norms as failures, and blame the United States as the driver of the failed systems, moving staunch US allies toward neutrality on key US policy initiatives is a significant gain, even if the result is not explicitly supportive of Russia.

The official discourse of the US government over the course of multiple administrations has been that only a few nations in the region—primarily Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua—have been nondemocratic adversaries, while the vast majority have been democratic allies with shared values. Despite the long US relationship with the region, the massive US investment and assistance programs, which dwarf Russian efforts, and the enormous diaspora communities sending tens of billions of dollars a year from the United States to their countries of origin, only one country, tiny Costa Rica, has agreed to abide by the sanctions regime against Russia.

This is a surprising result of Moscow's efforts. Russia has virtually no aid programs and only a tiny diaspora community in Latin America, but essentially Russia "played the US to a draw on its home field," as one European diplomat in Argentina put it.⁸¹

IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion surveys show that Russia enjoyed a relatively favorable image in the region after Putin launched a more aggressive foreign policy in conjunction with the 2014 invasion of Crimea but suffered significantly after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to annual surveys by Latinobarómetro, a Chile-based think tank, Russia's image in 2015, just a year after Russia's annexation of Crimea, was good or very good in most of the region (see figure 4). Given the international outcry against the Russian aggression and the region's historical ties to the United States, this was a remarkable achievement.

Russia's image had further improved by 2020 (see figure 4), even though by then the Kremlin had been waging a war of aggression against Ukraine for six years, had launched an expeditionary campaign in Syria to support Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, and had deployed mercenaries in Libya, Central Africa, and Mozambique—all events that might have been expected to depress public opinion ratings.

Notably, Russia's image improved as Russian state media and its allies became more active. Actualidad RT began broadcasting in Argentina in 2014, in Chile in 2015, and in Mexico in 2016. Simultaneously, the Kremlin developed an ambitious diplomatic agenda, and between 2014 and 2020, Vladimir Putin visited Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru. Russian foreign affairs minister Sergey Lavrov traveled to Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela during the same period.

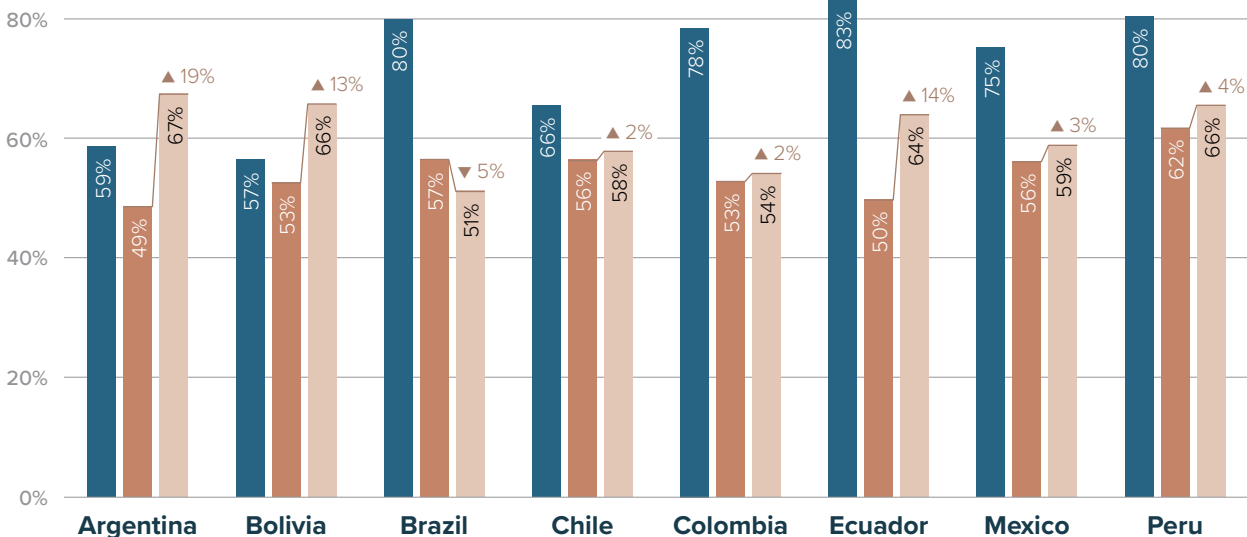
However, the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine appears to have damaged Russia's image. A survey by Synopsis at the end of February 2022 found that 65.2 percent of the Argentine public rejected the invasion, although 23.1 percent judged the Russian position to be good or very good. Similarly, Putin's image suffered significantly (rated bad or very bad by 63 percent of respondents), but he retained some sympathy (25.5 percent gave a positive rating).⁸²

FIGURE 4.

Public opinion in Latin America: United States and Russia, 2015 and 2020

PERCENT OF POPULATION WITH “GOOD” OR “VERY GOOD” PERCEPTIONS:

■ United States, 2015 ■ Russia, 2015 ■ Russia, 2020 / Russia, change from 2015 to 2020



Source: Data from Latinobarómetro, www.latinobarometro.org.

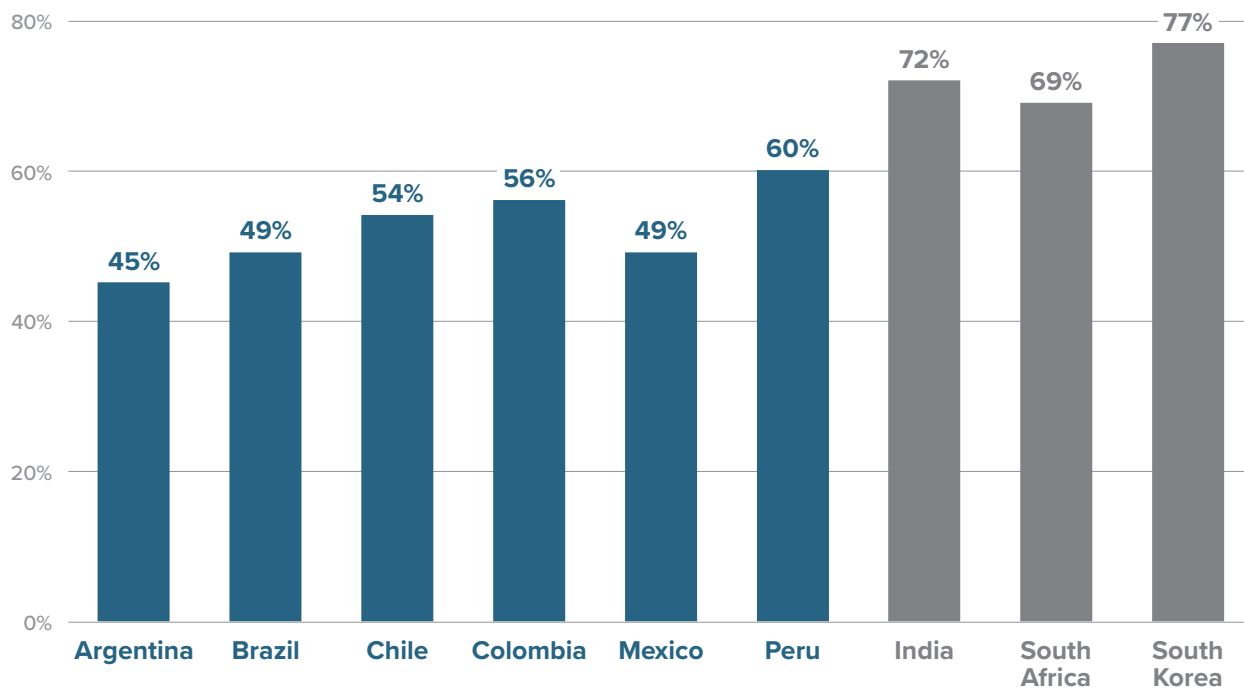
In Mexico, a poll conducted by the newspaper *El Financiero* found that 15 percent of Mexicans were in favor of Ukraine, while only 7 percent supported Russia. However, an overwhelming 70 percent opted for neutrality—still a positive outcome for Russia.⁸³ President Putin had a 64 percent negative rating and a 16 percent positive rating.

The public disapproval of the invasion hides key factors that may create opportunities for Russian disinformation campaigns that have an impact on public perception. Latin Americans tend to perceive the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a low-risk, distant threat. A yearly poll conducted in April 2022 by Ipsos showed that just 45 percent of Argentinians, 49 percent of Brazilians, 54 percent of Chileans, 56 percent of Colombians, 49 percent of Mexicans, and 60 percent of Peruvians considered the war a threat to their country. By comparison, 72 percent of Indians, 69 percent of South Africans, and 77 percent of South Koreans had this perception (see figure 5).⁸⁴ This low level of threat perception among the Latin American public, partially resulting from the Kremlin’s disinformation efforts, has created an opportunity for Moscow to present the US attempts to gain the endorsement of the Latin American governments for the sanctions against Russia as an expression of Western imperialism.

FIGURE 5.

Perceived threat from Russia-Ukraine war

DO YOU THINK THE CONFLICT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IS A THREAT TO YOUR COUNTRY?



Source: Ipsos, "The World's Response to the War in Ukraine" (survey), April 2022.

IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKERS: REQUESTED WEAPONS TRANSFERS

Looking at the impact of Russian information operations on decision-makers in Latin America, the case of requested weapons transfers is instructive. In January 2023, US Southern Command commander General Laura Richardson explored the possibility of exchanging aging Russian-made military equipment—primarily helicopters owned by the armed forces of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru—for newer, US-made systems.⁸⁵ The Russian equipment in the region cannot be maintained because of sanctions and in many cases was already largely inoperable.

While relatively worthless in Latin America, this equipment is of high value to the Ukrainian armed forces, who have the skills and infrastructure to maintain it. It could have replaced lost equipment and provided enhanced air mobility. The proposed exchange was a potential win-win, benefiting all involved.

As Richardson was making her pitch, German chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Brazil as part of a trip to Latin America focused on commercial matters, but he also sought to negotiate the acquisition of 35mm rounds for the Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns already in Ukrainian hands and 105mm rounds for the Leopard 1 tanks soon to be delivered to Kyiv. Again, it looked like a good deal for both sides, as Brazil's armed forces have no urgent need for this ammunition and Germany was willing to pay market price for it.

Both efforts, however, were flatly rejected by the Latin American governments that were once firm US allies. Colombia's Petro declared that "even if this equipment becomes junk, we will not hand over Russian weapons to be sent to Ukraine to continue a war." In Mexico, López Obrador not only showed his opposition to any transfer of weapons to Ukraine but also criticized Germany's decision to provide battle tanks to Kyiv. Argentina's Alberto Fernández rejected sending weapons to Ukraine. Similarly, Brazil's President Lula rejected Scholz's request, saying that "Russia is wrong," but adding, "I still think that when one won't, two won't fight. You need to find peace."⁸⁶ Ecuador and Peru took no steps to support the US request. The public rejection of the US and German proposals was described enthusiastically by Russian media.⁸⁷

While it is not possible to parse the weight of different issues in these decisions, the mass rejection offers an example of how Moscow's influence activities shape the political environment to maximize the chances of a favorable outcome for its interests. For almost a decade, the Kremlin's disinformation machine disseminated a set of themes aimed at sowing distrust of the United States as an imperialist, conflict-creating power while presenting Russia as respectful of Latin American neutrality. These efforts likely played a role in the failed US effort.

Conclusion and Recommendations

US efforts to confront the Russian assault against the international liberal order face a critical test in Latin America. Using disinformation, economic coercion, and covert and overt political action, Moscow has sowed anti-US sentiment and weakened democratic institutions in a strategic space critical for Washington while shaping the behavior of Latin American governments in Russia's favor. This relentless campaign is transforming the region into a fertile ground for authoritarianism and an increasingly hostile territory for the United States. It is in Washington's strategic interests to counter Russian information operations, which represent an integral part of the Putin government's permanent, multifaceted, and integrated hybrid warfare.

Regional and international stakeholders often underestimate the scale, breadth, and strategic importance of these influence campaigns in Latin America and the significant impact such low-cost, high-return strategic investments and policies can have in changing public opinion and government alliances.

Russian information operations rely on consistent, persistent disinformation narratives promulgated across traditional and social media platforms and extending to include outreach efforts targeted toward academic communities, the security sector, diaspora groups, and economic elites. There are clear indications that these efforts have been effective, though it is not possible to disaggregate the level of impact from that of other important social, political, and economic factors. At a minimum, they have reinforced an echo chamber that has weakened US influence in Latin America.

Analysis of social media posts and other data from a variety of sources shows that the Russian influence machine has actively supported violent protests in driving social unrest in countries aligned with the United States while remaining virtually silent on executions, human rights abuses, and violations of domestic and international law in countries friendly to Moscow. Additionally, there are clear signs of electoral meddling in Colombia, Mexico, and Bolivia, either directly

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or with Venezuela acting as a proxy, although in none of these cases was the interference decisive in the outcome of the election. Despite these aggressive tactics, public opinion of Russia in Latin America remained extraordinarily positive until Russia invaded Ukraine. Even after the invasion, Russia has retained significant support.

The Russian state messaging has been leveraged and amplified by regional media allies; a cadre of super-spreader influencers in Latin America, Russia, and Europe; and a core group of experienced ambassadors and senior diplomats, who provide a stable network with regional expertise, strong personal and professional connections, and political allies across the region.⁸⁸ This network has created and exploits multiple effective platforms to disseminate misinformation, disinformation, and curated messages.

Much of the Russian messaging is not overtly pro-Russia, except on subjects such as the Sputnik V vaccine for COVID-19 or the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The preponderance of the messaging is anti-US and anti-NATO, and challenges the current world order. This allows Russia to tailor its messaging to its natural allies. These allies include traditional and radical populist groups and leaders on the Latin American left, which have long regarded the US presence in Latin America as an antirevolutionary imperialist force.

At the same time, influential Russian figures on the far right, such as Aleksandr Dugin and his acolytes, appeal effectively to the radical populist right in the region, centered in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, through a message of exclusionary nationalism, religious conservatism, deep social conservatism, anti-globalization, and an anti-immigration stance.

This combination of influence messaging has achieved what Russian strategists appear to have aimed for: not an outpouring of public support for Russia in an area of strategic US influence but a studied neutrality that leads key allies long considered to be close to the United States to not support US policies that affect Russia. The results can be noted in the almost complete absence of regional adherence to US and NATO economic sanctions, the ambiguity of most Latin American nations in their support for Ukraine, and an unwillingness to condemn Russia in international forums. Neutrality is a significant victory for Russia in a region where the US presence has long dominated, and where the United States' historical and cultural ties and economic interests far outweigh those of Russia.

Despite Russia's current enormous economic difficulties, it has the capacity and has demonstrated the willingness to continue these relatively low-cost but high-impact activities, to the detriment of US interests, liberal democratic governance, and the rule of law. The authoritarian trend in the region and the consolidation of the two most authoritarian regimes supported by Russia—Nicolás Maduro's in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega's in Nicaragua—are danger signs for US strategic goals and heartening signs for Putin's art of the possible in a region where Russia should have little opportunity to advance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this initial survey, several steps are available to US policymakers to begin to push back against expanding Russian influence in Latin America, which is being achieved through Moscow's relatively effective deployment of low-cost information operations. While Russia now has a broad, complex, and functioning influence network across Latin America, the United States also has friends and allies it can call on to help prevent Russia from controlling the regional narrative. The following recommendations can buttress this effort.

Prioritize the creation of a baseline, interagency assessment and mapping of the Russian information operations in Latin America to understand Russia's strategic goals and operations more fully. This report could serve as a starting point, and the evaluation should be conducted by individual country, as well as by region. The assessment should include

- Russian funding of political campaigns in the region and other covert political actions;
- identification and, where possible, public denunciation of Russian government-organized nongovernmental organizations and business groups that function as agents of the Russian state;
- comprehensive identification of Russian groups such as NK SESLA selling surveillance technologies, cryptology expertise, and other technologies widely used to strengthen the authoritarian actions and repressive tactics of regional governments;
- identification of social media influencers, points of entry in the educational system, and the multiple media platforms Russia exploits in its information operations;
- determination of the number of official and unofficial Russian operatives in each country to identify specific cases where Russian diplomatic missions are not operating in compliance with international norms and laws; and
- identification of noninformational activities that support influence operations.

Use the baseline assessment to reassess erroneous preconceptions and assumptions in existing policies toward Russia in Latin America. Such a reassessment should also be directed toward the assumptions undergirding past and current analyses of the threat factors derived from Russia's presence. Once the scope of the Russian operations is understood, including areas of vulnerability, policy can be developed and reshaped to meet the threat more adequately.

Develop a whole-of-government response to counter Russia's information operations and integrated strategy. This would bring dedicated resources and experienced actors to the problem. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the State Department's Global Engagement Center, and other relevant actors in the State Department, Defense Department, and other government agencies could lead the effort. This effort might include

- providing cultural exchanges and training for regional journalists to develop public-facing, fact-based narratives to counter Russian information operations in the region based on an accurate understanding of those efforts and local support for authoritarianism;

- promoting civil society and academic exchanges across the region to help train rule-of-law activists, anti-corruption groups, and others to identify and expose Russian disinformation campaigns and support for authoritarian regimes, antidemocratic actions, illicit business, and the dissemination of false information;
- establishing a credible, fact-based outreach program and center in the region through USIP or a similar entity that has both Russian and Latin American expertise, with the program recognizing the deep roots of the appeal of some of the Russian narratives; and
- studying and publicizing false Russian narratives that are propagated in the region and developing effective counternarratives while working with willing governments to detect, contain, and disrupt Russian information operations.

Leverage and resource existing entities (such as USIP) with deep experience in conflict resolution and Russian and Latin American area expertise to conduct ongoing educational outreach in Latin America on the history, consequences, and dynamics of conflicts such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the context of the revolutionary processes and conflicts in Latin America, this would provide a rich opportunity for a realistic view of Russia’s international behavior and its impact in Latin America. This, in turn, would be expected to facilitate an understanding of the consequences for the region of conflicts such as the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the outreach would be expected to improve the United States’ greatly reduced soft power in the region.

Prioritize naming experienced ambassadors with the requisite regional expertise and language skills to posts in key strategic countries. This renewal of the diplomatic representatives stationed in the region should be complemented by a systematic and well-targeted program of visits by high-ranking government officials. This can more effectively counter and challenge Russia’s core diplomatic assets in the region.

Notes

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1. The term “disinformation” is used in its technical sense as information that is known to be false and is intentionally spread as a hostile act of tactical political subversion. Disinformation differs from misinformation, defined as false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, online edition, “Disinformation,” www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation; and “‘Misinformation’ vs. ‘Disinformation,’” *Dictionary.com*, August 15, 2022, www.dictionary.com/e/misinformation-vs-disinformation-get-informed-on-the-difference.
2. Associated Press, “Putin: Soviet Collapse a ‘genuine tragedy,’” *NBC News*, April 25, 2005, www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057.
3. Wynne Russell, “Russian Policy towards the ‘Near Abroad’: The Discourse of Hierarchy,” Working Paper no. 1995/7, Department of International Relations, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, 1995, 7, <https://ir.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/1762/russian-policy-towards-near-abroad-discourse-hierarchy>; Andrei Kortunov, “Russia and the ‘Near Abroad’: Looking for a Model Relationship,” in *US-Russian Partnership: Meeting the New Millennium*, ed. Sergey Oznobishchev and James H. Brusstar (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1999), <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/lps16830/US%20Russian%20Partnership%20July%2009/usrp7.html>; Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and George Soroka and Tomasz Stepniewski: “Introduction: Russia and the Rest: Permeable Sovereignty and the Former Soviet Socialist Republics,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 6, no. 2 (2020), <https://spps-jspps.autorenbetreueung.de/files/06-02-intro-01.pdf>.
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5. On the strategic importance of Latin America, “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Approved by the President of Russia, November 30, 2016” [in Russian], President of Russia, www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451.
6. Vladimir Putin, “Army-2022: Putin’s Speech (Live Stream)” [in Russian], Dmitro Sevastopol, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ-AnyvuZe0.
7. Agence France-Presse and AP, “Maduro dijo que habló con Alberto Fernández, Lula de Silva y Petro para unirse a los ‘hermanos mayores’ Putin y Xi,” *La Nación*, January 13, 2023, www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/maduro-dijo-que-hablo-con-alberto-fernandez-lula-da-silva-y-petro-para-unirse-a-los-hermanos-mayores-nid13012023.
8. Russell, “Russian Policy Towards the ‘Near Abroad’”; Kortunov, “Russia and the ‘Near Abroad’”; Toal, *Near Abroad*; and Soroka and Stepniewski: “Introduction: Russia and the Rest.”
9. The Monroe Doctrine was born as a principle to prevent the penetration of European powers into the Western Hemisphere, then became an argument to justify the right of the United States to condition the foreign and internal policies of its Latin American neighbors. See “Monroe Doctrine, 1823,” Office of the Historian, US Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe>; Mark T. Gilderhus, “The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications,” *Political Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006); Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine: 1945–1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); and Russell C. Crandall, *The United States and Latin America after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
10. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) aims to achieve “integrated development” for Latin America and draws inspiration from Simón Bolívar and José Martí. Bolívar, “the Liberator,” spearheaded the Latin American independence movement against Spanish rule (1810–1824). Today the Bolivarian Alliance consists of 10 full member states—Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, the Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela—but is said to work with “a wide range of social actors who are not confined to the territorial limits of its official member countries.” Most recently, it has positioned itself against the so-called neoliberal, market-oriented economics of the late 20th century and for “solidarity, cooperation and complementarity.” These espoused principles suggest the basis for Russia’s interest in the Bolivarian Alliance. See “Information on the Bolivarian Alliance,” ALBA Info, December 2014, www.albainfo.org/what-is-the-alba.
11. The most recent articulation of US interests making these points is the Posture Statement of the US Southern Command. See “Statement of General Laura J. Richardson, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the 118th Congress, House

Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2023,” www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/SOUTHCOMs-2023-Posture-Statement-to-Congress.

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13. Noam Lupu, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, eds., *Pulse of Democracy* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, LAPOP, 2021).
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15. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power.
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17. John B. Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics,” *Demokratizatsiya* 12, no. 1 (January 2004).
18. Primakov spoke fluent Spanish and had deep ties to Latin America. In 2010, he was awarded the Orden de Solidaridad by the Cuban government. See “Otorgan a Primakov Orden de Solidaridad con Cuba,” *Granma*, January 22, 2010, www.granma.cu/granmad/2010/01/22/interna/artic23.html.
19. Eugene Rumer, “The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 5, 2019, www.carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254.
20. Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Foresight: New Challenges Require Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Warfare” [in Russian], *Military-Industrial Courier*, February 26, 2013, www.archive.ph/gHt9q.
21. The essence of this model is that every deployment of an information weapon or tactic (or of any other weapon) should be instrumented, monitored, and assessed; the conclusions fed back rapidly into the battle; and activity amended accordingly. *Experimentation* means to try something to see what happens. *Instrumentation* means to put in place *before the attack* the means to monitor the opponent’s society and government systematically and widely in order to determine all effects. Instrumentation differs from *metrication* in that metrication starts by defining a target against which effect can or must be measured: metrics. Metrication only sees what it is looking for. Instrumentation allows observation of all effects, including the opponent’s efforts to resist and counter the attack.
22. “Russian Media from the Inside: Interview with Margarita Simonyan, Editor-in-Chief of Russia Today” [in Russian], *Afisha Daily*, October 18, 2011, <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/archive/ministry-of-truth-simonyan>.
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24. “Concepts of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad” [in Russian], Garant, September 6, 2022, www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/405140851/.
25. These principles include *suddenness*, to surprise the opponent; *constant activity*, to maintain surprise and keep the opponent from regaining the initiative; *deception*, to fool and confuse the enemy; *exploitation of success*, pouring resources primarily into the most vulnerable point to destabilize the opponent’s whole system; and *echeloning*, attacking in successive waves to overwhelm the opponent, break down the defenses, and achieve systemic collapse. A comprehensive discussion of these principles demonstrating how deeply they are embedded in Russian military thinking can be found in V. E. Savkin’s classic Soviet manual, “The Basic Principles of Operational Art and Tactics” [in Russian] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1972).
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- Narratives,” *Strategic Perspectives* 34, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, June 2021, <https://ndu.press.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>.
27. Interview in Saint Petersburg, October 2019.
 28. Johanna Cilano Pelaez and María Isabel Puerta Riera, “Un año de guerra, Latinoamérica y la narrativa del Kremlin,” *Latinoamerica* 21, March 5, 2023, <https://latinoamerica21.com/es/un-ano-de-guerra-latinoamerica-y-la-narrativa-del-kremlin>; and Daniel Iriarte, “Desinformación rusa. ‘La operación EE.UU. secuestro 3.000 bebés’: en América Latina Rusia ya ganó la partida,” *El Confidencial*, April 4, 2023, www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2023-03-20/rusia-ucrania-guerra-cinco-claves-para-entender-invasion_3595921.
 29. For RT en Español traffic, see Similarweb, www.similarweb.com/fr/website/actualidad.rt.com/#geography.
 30. Daniel Iriarte, “RT en Español: How Russian Disinformation Targets 500 Million Spanish Speakers,” Centre for Democratic Integrity, September 2022, www.democratic-integrity.eu/rt-en-espanol-how-russian-disinformation-targets-500-million-spanish-speakers.
 31. Interview with a Colombia-based journalist, Bogotá, October 2022.
 32. The three winners of the prestigious awards were Boris Kuznetsov, Mauricio Ampuero, and Semión Sénderov. See “El Club de Periodistas de México otorga premios a corresponsales de RT,” *Actualidad RT*, December 7, 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/451042-club-periodistas-mexico-otorga-premios>.
 33. Farah and Tarez, “Iran in Latin America.”
 34. Farah and Tarez, “Iran in Latin America.” Many of the most prominent Spanish-language websites that create narratives promoting Russian or Bolivarian narratives came to prominence as part of the information infrastructure of Colombia’s Marxist-led FARC guerrillas. Since the 2016 peace agreement between the FARC and the government of Colombia, the sites have become more Bolivarian and Russia-focused, in some cases providing Russian-language content.
 35. Carolina Mussio, “RT en Español, noticias y actualidad para toda América Latina,” *Todo TV News*, December 15, 2022, www.todo.tv/news/rt-en-espanol-noticias-y-actualidad-para-toda-america-latina.
 36. In 2020, the Institute for the Study of War found content-sharing agreements in Mexico (2015); Paraguay (2016); Cuba (2017); and Uruguay, Argentina, Panama, and Brazil (2019). This omits the public agreements in Venezuela, Colombia, and Nicaragua. See Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros, “The Kremlin’s Expanding Media Conglomerate,” Institute for the Study of War, January 15, 2020, www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate.
 37. On Red Nacional y Popular providing a platform for anti-US criticism, see, for example, Viktor Ternovsky, “Ukraine and Falklands According to the Foreign Office” [in Russian], *Sputnik News*, August 23, 2022, www.nacionalypopular.com/2022/08/23/ucrania-y-malvinas-segun-el-foreign-office. On *Página Transversal* doing the same, see, for example, Alberto Buela, “Dugin: Profeta de Eurasia,” *Página Transversal*, August 22, 2013, <https://paginatransversal.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/duguin-profeta-de-eurasia>.
 38. Farah and Tarez, “Iran in Latin America.”
 39. Pablo Jofré, “Rusia: ¿Responsable de una crisis alimentaria mundial?,” *TeleSur*, November 7, 2022, www.TeleSurtv.net/bloggers/Rusia-Responsable-de-una-crisis-alimentaria-mundial-20221107-0001.html. The *TeleSur* publication notes that the piece was also published on *HispanTV*. See also Pablo Jofré, “¿Rusia, responsable de una crisis alimentaria mundial?,” *HispanTV*, November 14, 2022, www.hispantv.com/noticias/opinion/555221/rusia-responsable-de-una-crisis-alimentaria-mundial.
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 41. Inna Afinogenova, “Donde está Inna Afinogenova y qué le pasó,” YouTube video, May 3, 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-7BBnduuCc&ab_channel=InnaAfinogenova.
 42. José Ospina-Valencia, “Russia’s Propaganda War in Latin America,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 13, 2022, www.dw.com/en/how-russia-is-waging-a-successful-propaganda-war-in-latin-america/a-61467050.
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 44. Luis Casal, “Pablo Iglesias Lanza su propia tele junto a una productora nacida tras el 15-M para Volver al activismo de ‘La Tuerka,’” *El Español*, November 22, 2022, www.elespanol.com/invertia/medios/20221122/pablo-iglesias-propia-productora-nacida-activismo-tuerka/720178424_0.html.
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