

Russia's Strategy Towards Latin America After the War in Ukraine

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Summary

Over the past few years, Russia has developed a systematic strategy to increase its influence in Latin America based on four lines of action: intense diplomatic activity, a broad disinformation campaign, an effort to expand its military presence, and a series of economic projects focused on the energy and mining sectors. Despite having limited resources and having reaped significant failures, Moscow has established a network of satellite States that includes Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, dislocated the regional status quo and developed a privileged dialogue with Mexico and Brazil. Looking to the near future, Moscow promises to continue promoting authoritarianism and transforming Latin America into a hostile space for the United States and the European Union. Faced with this prospect, Washington and its European allies need a strategy to respond to the Kremlin's threat in the hemisphere.

Keywords: Russia, Latin America, Nicaragua, Venezuela, strategy, diplomacy, disinformation, defense, investment, trade.

Introduction

In April 2023, a few weeks after the first anniversary of the war of aggression launched by Vladimir Putin's regime against Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov toured Latin America, visiting Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Brazil. As part of the propaganda campaign accompanying his visit, the head of Kremlin diplomacy published an article in which he stressed that the Kremlin's relations with many countries in the region "were based on strategic partnerships" and expressed his government's willingness to "strengthen the Russian-Latin American cooperation on the foundation of mutual support, solidarity and consideration of each other's interests".¹

What is certain is that a superficial glance at the volume of Russia's relations with Latin America might encourage one to consider Lavrov's words as another sign of the Kremlin's penchant for grandstanding. Russian economic relations with the region are meager in volume. In fact, Moscow's exports to Latin America reached a value of \$12.8 billion in 2021.² By comparison, Moscow sold \$28.3 billion to Germany and \$74.3 billion to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the same year. Nor do human relations justify the Kremlin's hyperbole. According to UNESCO data, Russia was hosting 1,738 Latin American students in 2019 (the latest data available). In the same year, the figure was 15,405 in France and 20,004 in Australia.³

With these levels of exchange, the question is whether Latin America matters to the Kremlin and, if so, why. The first question seems to be answered in view of the attention paid by Russian diplomacy to the region. Since 2014, both Vladimir Putin

and Sergei Lavrov have made a series of tours of the region with special attention to countries with which Russia has a historical relationship rooted in Soviet times (Cuba, Nicaragua); but also, to other states considered of special strategic value by the Kremlin. Such was the case of Putin's visits to Brazil in 2014 and 2019 and Lavrov in 2023 or the latter's trip to Mexico in 2020.

Parallel to these more visible diplomatic tours, Moscow has developed abundant contacts with key figures of the regime. This was the case of the trip of the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, to Nicaragua in 2013,⁴ the visit of the Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, to Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua in 2016⁵ and more recently the meetings of the then Secretary of the National Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nicolai Patrushev, and the President of the oil giant Rosneft, Igor Sechin, to Cuba and Venezuela in 2023.⁶

The Fundamentals of Russia's Strategy towards Latin America

This diplomatic activity underscores the strategic importance the Kremlin attaches to the region, despite limited human and economic exchanges. In reality, Russia's bid to establish a presence in Latin America is not new. The first attempts to set foot on the American continent date back to the 18th century and would intensify after the Bolshevik Revolution, when the Comintern saw the region as fertile ground for extending the communist model. However, it was from the beginning of the Cold War, after identifying the United States (US) as the main barrier to its hegemonic project, that the Kremlin deployed a systematic effort to penetrate the continent. Its results would lead to the consolidation of Cuba as a strategic ally in the 1960s and the establishment of a lasting relationship with the Nicaraguan Sandinista Front after the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza in 1979.

This will to be present in Latin America would survive the collapse of the Soviet Union. The truth is that the collapse of the Soviet system not only broke Moscow's ability to project itself into the region, but also dealt a devastating blow to its Latin American allies. The Sandinistas lost the government in Nicaragua after the electoral defeat of 1990 and Cuba sank into an economic depression - the so-called special period - as a result of the end of Soviet subsidies. Thus, the demise of the communist model wiped out what the Kremlin had built up in the region over almost four decades.

However, Russian diplomacy showed signs of regaining its appetite for Latin America with extraordinary speed. The arrival of Yevgeny Primakov at the Russian Foreign Ministry in December 1995, only three years after the official disappearance of the Soviet Union, marked a nationalist turn in Russian diplomacy, the return of imperial ambitions and, with them, the resurrection of interest in the Latin American space. Primakov himself made a trip to Cuba, Venezuela and Mexico just six months after assuming the leadership of the Kremlin's foreign action.⁷ Subsequently, attention to Latin America has grown steadily as is visible in the foreign policy concepts published by the Russian Foreign Ministry over the years. In fact, the region occupied a marginal place among the geographic areas considered in the 2008 edition of this document to then gain notoriety in the successive versions of the text and become a relevant region in the last concept elaborated in 2023, after the invasion of Ukraine.⁸

Russia's return to Latin America since the late 1990s is consistent with the principles of the Primakov doctrine, which judged the consolidation of US unipolar hegemony at the end of the Cold War as an unacceptable scenario and advocated a strategy

aimed at eroding US power and encouraging the growth of alternative power centers with which Moscow could form a coalition to confront Washington. From this perspective, Latin America became a doubly attractive scenario. On the one hand, the exploitation of anti-American sentiments and support for radical leftist regimes in the region offered an opportunity to erode US control over its strategic periphery. On the other hand, support for Brazil's aspirations to become a global power offered an opportunity to build an alternative power to the US in the Western Hemisphere with whom Russia could build a cooperative relationship.

This geopolitical design that combines the consolidation of a series of satellite regimes in the region with support for the global ambitions of Latin American powers - Brazil and, to a lesser extent, Mexico - underlay Primakov's vision in the late 1990s and continues to mark Vladimir Putin's foreign policy in the period following the invasion of Ukraine. In fact, it was these approaches that pushed Primakov to become a champion of the establishment of a strategic partnership with Brazil.⁹ It is also this same outlook that has guided Vladimir Putin's diplomacy, which has combined support for the Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan regimes with a bid for closer relations with Brazil that included an invitation to join the BRICS group.¹⁰

Of course, this is not to say that Russia has given up on other secondary objectives in Latin America. The Kremlin has also seen additional opportunities in the region ranging from its role as a market for Russian defense industry exports to a huge space for circumventing international sanctions. But it has been above all the relevance of Latin America within the Kremlin's strategy to weaken U.S. dominance and promote a multipolar order friendly to its interests that has fueled Moscow's interest.

On this basis, Moscow's strategy towards Latin America has been built on a series of principles that have informed the external action of the Russian Federation. In this regard, the first point to underline is the regional projection of the principle of constructive destruction as made explicit by Sergei Karaganov, an advisor to Vladimir Putin, a leading intellectual exponent of Russian ultranationalism, who currently chairs the Council for Defense and Foreign Policy, one of the most influential Russian think tanks. According to Karaganov, Russia should curb any pretense of collaboration with Western countries to safeguard the present international order and on the contrary facilitate its collapse insofar as it is frontally opposed to its interests.¹¹ The practical application of this vision has been seen in Russia's unrestricted backing of its Latin American allies when they have carried out blatant electoral frauds, such as Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela (2018 and 2024) and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2021). The same can be said when these same regimes have resorted to massive repression campaigns as has been the case in Caracas in 2017 and 2024 or previously in Managua in 2018. In all these cases, the rejection of any concertation with the US has been absolute and the only goal sought by the Kremlin has been to weaken Washington at any cost.

At the same time, Russian foreign policy - like Soviet foreign policy before it - has tended to blur the lines between peace and war, making hostile use of what are considered instruments of peaceful inter-State relations such as public diplomacy or trade. This practice, which views war as a multidimensional governmental endeavor and demands the use of all state capabilities for war purposes, has its roots in a generation of Russian military thinkers whose approaches crystallized in the misnamed Gerasimov Doctrine - in reference to the current chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov - or Non-Linear War Doctrine.¹² This perspective is complemented by the so-called Limited Actions Strategy which sets

out how Russia should employ its limited resources to project strength in peripheral arenas.¹³

These concepts have become visible in the strategy deployed by the Kremlin in Latin America. Moscow, for example, has deployed systematic disinformation campaigns in the region to weaken the U.S. image and stimulate protests against those governments in the region considered close to Washington. At the same time, it has resorted to economic coercion by threatening to block access to the Russian market to force changes in the foreign policy of certain Latin American countries. This was the case, for example, when Moscow blocked Ecuadorian agricultural exports until the Quito government desisted from its intention to transfer its army's aging Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters to the U.S. for delivery to Ukraine.¹⁴ In parallel, Russia has made limited deployments of its armed forces to show its support for allied governments in the region at critical junctures. This was the case with the deployment of a contingent of a hundred military specialists to Venezuela in 2019 when President Nicolas Maduro was facing escalating pressure from the US government, neighboring countries and the internal opposition.

At the same time, the implementation of Russian foreign policy in general and towards Latin America has relied not only on the traditional state instruments – diplomacy and armed forces – but also in a wide variety of non-state entities, ranging from companies to non-governmental organizations. To a large extent, this trend is a reflection of the oligarchic functioning of the Russian state, where a minority monopolizes key government positions and the country's main economic groups. Consequently, it is inevitable that government priorities will inform the decisions of large companies and private organizations since the decision-makers are the same group of people. But, at the same time, the use of private entities to serve the government's interests is supported by the ideological vision of Vladimir Putin's regime, which emphasizes the need to strengthen the state and unify society under its control as conditions for the survival of the Russian nation.¹⁵

This fusion of public and private is repeated again and again in Russian foreign action towards Latin America. Rosatom, the Moscow business conglomerate in charge of civil nuclear projects, financed the support of a group of Russian political advisors to the campaign of the then Bolivian President Evo Morales for the 2019 elections, a venture inspired by the same company's long experience in electoral interference in Russia.¹⁶ As already mentioned, Igor Sechin, president of the giant Rosneft, closely connected with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), has been a key player in Moscow's diplomacy towards Latin America.¹⁷ The Russian Orthodox Church, through the Department for External Relations of the Moscow Patriarch's Church, has established a network of representatives for Latin America that collaborates with the cultural centers of the Russian embassies in the region.¹⁸

Finally, Russian strategy both globally and in Latin America is dominated by the search for short-term results, even at the cost of investing scarce resources and taking considerable risks. Such an attitude is nurtured by the existence of real vulnerabilities – demographic decline, technological dependence from abroad, etc. – that place the Kremlin in a fragile strategic position. This weakness feeds a discourse that sees the West as an enemy determined to destroy Russia and emphasizes the fear of a collapse similar to that suffered by the country in periods such as the 1917 revolution or the collapse of communism in 1992.¹⁹ Faced with this perspective, Russian foreign action sees it justified to resort to risky and aggressive actions in an attempt to force a radical change of scenario in its favor.

This aggressiveness of Russian foreign action has become visible in Latin America over the past few years. Moscow's diplomacy, for example, has gained notoriety for its willingness to openly interfere in the internal affairs of countries in the region to weaken hostile governments and favor like-minded politicians. It is worth recalling how Russia criticized the government of President Ivan Duque of Colombia at the United Nations (UN) in April 2022 for its alleged unwillingness to implement the peace agreement.²⁰ Moscow's criticism came in response to Colombia's condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and landed in the run-up to that year's presidential elections that brought to power Gustavo Petro, a leader who has turned out to be much more to Vladimir Putin's liking.²¹

Russia has also been willing to take risks to gain prestige in the region. This has been the case when Moscow has made deployments of Tu-150M1 Blackjack strategic bombers to Venezuela in 2003, 2008 and 2018 as a show of solidarity with the Chavista regime.²² The same can be said of the initial supply of Russia's COVID-19 Sputnik V vaccine to Argentina and other countries in the region that multiplied the Kremlin's prestige among governments desperately seeking assistance in dealing with the pandemic.²³ However, the influence initially gained by Russia faded as soon as it became clear that the promise to deliver millions of doses to meet the needs of Latin American countries was far beyond the Kremlin's scientific and industrial capabilities.²⁴

Moscow's Diplomatic Efforts

Built on the principles outlined above, Russia's strategy towards Latin America has been developed through a series of key efforts: diplomatic relations, disinformation, military collaboration and economic relations. In terms of diplomatic relations, Russia maintains 17 embassies and several consulates in Latin America.²⁵ This network of legations is headed by a relatively small group of diplomats, mostly from the Soviet era, who speak Spanish and/or Portuguese and who have spent a large part of their careers in various Latin American countries or countries directly associated with the region. Just as an example, the ambassadors in Brasilia, Santiago, Bogota and Mexico City as of mid-2024 had held positions in other capitals of the continent. This in-depth knowledge of the regional context is not common among representatives of Western countries and provides a substantial advantage to Russian foreign action.

On this basis, Kremlin diplomats have been extremely active in building a network of relations aimed at expanding Russian influence. These contacts have not followed any ideological preferences but have been guided by an absolute pragmatism aimed at maximizing benefits for the Kremlin. Thus, the Russian legation in Brazil worked on the organization of the trip that the conservative president, Jair Bolsonaro, made to Moscow in February 2022, a few weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, and facilitated the meeting during the visit of the Brazilian president's son, Carlos Bolsonaro, with Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the Committee for International Relations of the State Duma, and a key figure in Russian's ultranationalism.²⁶ A few weeks later, it was the Russian ambassador to Mexico, Viktor Koronelli, who welcomed the installation in the Chamber of Deputies of a Mexico-Russia Friendship Group, promoted by members of the leftist groups Movimiento de Restauración Nacional (MORENA) and Partido del Trabajo.²⁷

Contacts have gone beyond congresses. Russia has made a systematic effort to develop ties with Latin American justice agencies. As part of its outreach to Ecuador,

the Ecuadorian National Court and the Russian Prosecutor's Office signed a cooperation agreement in January 2018.²⁸ Subsequently, in January 2019, a delegation from the Russian Supreme Court paid a visit to its equivalent in Paraguay's judicial system.²⁹ Such contacts between justice systems have extended to Argentina, Mexico, and other countries in the region.³⁰ At the same time, Russian embassies have invested substantial efforts to engage with regional local governments in their host countries.³¹

All this public relations effort may seem irrelevant at first sight; but it helps to understand the behavior of a continent that is usually ready to criticize any possible violation of international law by the US or its Western allies; but which has been reluctant to punish Russia for its war of aggression against Ukraine. In general terms, Latin American countries have subscribed to the UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression, with the exception of certain capitals which have occasionally preferred to abstain and the cases of Venezuela and Nicaragua which have oscillated between declaring themselves absent or voting against in order to demonstrate their adherence to Moscow.³² However, beyond the votes in the international body, the region has maintained a calculated ambiguity that manifested itself in the difficulties to reach a consensus on a text condemning Russian aggression during the summit between the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2023.³³ The result was a minimal agreement with a disjointed expression of deep concern about a war that was raging in Ukraine.

Along with political ambiguity, all Latin American countries have stayed out of the US and EU sanctions against Russia. In fact, the region could only see merit in maintaining a position of neutrality in view of the experience of Costa Rica, whose visible support for Ukraine earned it a series of cyber-attacks by Russian hackers.³⁴ The same can be said of the lack of response to US requests for Latin American governments to hand over Russian military equipment in the hands of their armed forces - usually in poor condition due to lack of maintenance - with a view to transferring it to Ukraine. The above-mentioned commercial pressures from the Kremlin against the Ecuadorian government with the announcement of its intention to deliver a small number of Mi-17 helicopters not only dissuaded Quito, but also discouraged others who might have opted for similar arrangements, with the exception of Argentine President Javier Milei, who dared to cede two helicopters for delivery to Ukraine.³⁵ In any case, the Kremlin's success in keeping the vast majority of Latin American governments attached to its rhetoric of neutrality was not the result of coercion alone. The success of Moscow's protests and threats had much to do with the fact that they fell on ground fertilized by the laborious diplomatic work carried out by Russian delegations over the years.

The Kremlin's painstaking work to build political relations in the region has been accompanied by a massive disinformation effort combining the communication activities of embassies, the penetration in the region of Russian state-owned media companies and extensive social media campaigns aimed at weakening the image of the US and its allies in the region and making the Russian view of the international arena dominant. As for the Russian legations, it is difficult to overstate their role as terminals of the disinformation campaign. Kremlin ambassadors write articles and give interviews to the mainstream media of their host countries, disseminating Kremlin propaganda without in most cases facing any response.³⁶

At the same time, Russian diplomatic representations disseminate propaganda and hold events aimed at the Russian diaspora or the general public with the aim of

defending Kremlin actions contrary to the most elementary principles of international law such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014.³⁷ The embassies' communication effort is supported by a network of 117 Telegram channels, in principle aimed at the Russian emigrant community, but also distributing content in Spanish, Portuguese, English and other languages.³⁸ In addition, there are at least 15 profiles on X (formerly Twitter) belonging to embassies and consulates, to which must be added another one managed directly by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In total, these social network accounts reach a not inconsiderable 230,000 users.

Russian Disinformation System in Latin America

In any case, the communication effort of the embassies pales when compared to that deployed by the Russian state media, the RT television network and the Sputnik agency. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, both entities developed a systematic effort to spread their influence throughout the region. In particular, RT deployed a series of strategies that included its distribution as part of the government television offer (Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina) or the state satellite transmission system (Bolivia) as well as paying large private operators to be included in its offer (Colombia).³⁹ These efforts were complemented by two additional initiatives. On the one hand, RT established agreements to exchange content free of charge with well-established networks. Frequently, the main area of these exchanges was international news, where the Latin American media were weaker, and RT had an interest in influencing. The Russian network also reached agreements with local and regional cable operators to be included in their channel offerings. These small channels saw the Russian audiovisual offer as extremely attractive due to its careful production and its focus on topics outside their scope, usually international in nature.

This entire operation has been sustained by a substantial investment of financial resources and continued political backing from the Kremlin. It is unclear how much has been invested in RT's international operation. The Russian Duma voted a budget of some \$300 million to sustain the entire news conglomerate in 2017.⁴⁰ However, this figure could be an underestimate. Reports delivered to the US authorities by the company's branch operating in this country put the transfers from Russia at more than \$104 million in the 2017-2021 period. At the same time, the Kremlin has not been shy about exerting political pressure in favor of its information companies. When President Mauricio Macri announced the withdrawal of the Russian channel from the Argentine public television network, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov did not hesitate to describe the move as unfriendly.⁴¹ Subsequent negotiations would result in a complete rectification by the Buenos Aires government, which kept the Russian channel in its television offer.⁴² The result of this combination of money and politics was evident when RT announced in mid-2018 that its audience in Latin America had tripled to 18 million people.⁴³

The Kremlin's media activities in Latin America were hardly disturbed by the reaction of governments and private companies to the invasion of Ukraine. Unlike in the U.S. and the EU, where its broadcasting was blocked, Latin American authorities made no gestures to hinder RT's operation. The only exception was the Uruguayan government, which ordered its withdrawal from the programming of the state-owned communications company.⁴⁴ At the same time, some private channels suspended their collaboration agreements with Russian television. But beyond these cases, the Kremlin's communications arm continued to disseminate propaganda throughout the region without major setbacks. This has been the case, for example, in Argentina, where the channel remained accessible through public television after

Russia unleashed its war of aggression.

RT's role as a central element of Vladimir Putin's propaganda machine has not prevented it from continuing to be feted by some Latin American reporters. Such was the case in Mexico where the Journalists' Club honored RT's reporting activities at its December 2022 and 2023 meetings when its role in support of Moscow's expansionist objectives was more than evident.⁴⁵ This attitude is even more surprising considering the network's role in support of Kremlin-aligned dictatorships in the region. In fact, RT has offered favorable coverage to the regimes in Nicaragua and Venezuela even when both have been responsible for massive electoral frauds.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Russian company has collaborated in the technical training of the propaganda apparatuses of both governments. Thus, for example, RT has given training courses to the Nicaraguan government's communication agencies.⁴⁷

The Kremlin's media apparatus in Latin America is complemented by the deployment of social media campaigns that have been especially visible at critical junctures such as mass unrest or elections. Part of this communication effort is developed through the accounts of Russian diplomatic missions and the state media RT and Sputnik, which rely on a network of influencers for the elaboration and dissemination of information. Likewise, indications abound of the use of automated accounts or bots for the retransmission of content.⁴⁸ This type of dissemination tools were visible during the social protests in Chile and Colombia in 2019. In both cases, RT reported abundantly on the public order crises in both countries and relayed their news through social networks. In addition, both scenarios saw the operation of social network accounts that reproduced the Russian channel's content with a frequency only possible if *bots*.

This component of the Russian disinformation campaign is connected to Venezuela. In fact, a substantial portion of the social media accounts that disseminated the RT's Spanish-language content during the aforementioned 2019 riots was based in Venezuela.⁴⁹ This use of the Bolivarian Republic as a channel for the development of influence operations is not a novelty. A large number of social media accounts used during Moscow's campaign against the 2016 US elections had their IP addresses located in the Caribbean country.⁵⁰

The aforementioned elements - embassy propaganda, Russian state media news and the activity of related social networks - form an extensive disinformation system at the service of the Kremlin. This does not imply that there is a hierarchical structure that has absolute control over this entire communication conglomerate with the objective of ensuring that its components emit messages with identical orientation. Certainly, there are lines of communication between the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Kremlin media and the networks of influencers and friendly local media. However, the consistency of Moscow's disinformation campaigns relies primarily on a practical application of the purpose unit principle whereby the components of the system share ideological goals and approaches which makes it easier for them to reproduce similar content on the same topics, be it criticism of the U.S. presence in Latin America, the relevance of Russia in international affairs or the justification of the invasion of Ukraine.

It is difficult to measure precisely the impact of this enormous communication effort, but it is possible to assess the degree of Moscow's success in some specific cases. Thus, for example, there are indications that Russia developed a systematic effort to influence several electoral campaigns in Latin America. Apart from the

aforementioned episode of support for Evo Morales in Bolivia, a number of indications revealed Moscow's interest in backing Andrés Manuel López Obrador in his run for the presidency of Mexico in 2018.⁵¹ The same can be said of the case of Gustavo Petro whose campaign to become Colombian head of state came under suspicion of having been backed from social network accounts under the control of Russian operators.⁵² The truth is that there is no evidence that Moscow's influence was of sufficient magnitude to alter the outcome of both elections and the victories of Obrador and Petro were large enough to leave no doubt that they were the product of genuine popular support. But it is also true that Russia clearly benefited from the coming to power of both leaders.⁵³ In this sense, Russian support may not have had a decisive impact on the electoral results; but it offered Moscow the possibility of consolidating a cooperative relationship with two political figures that have ultimately facilitated the increase of Russian influence in Mexico and Colombia.

When assessing its impact on public opinion in the region, it can be said that the Kremlin's disinformation campaign has been unevenly effective. According to Latinobarometer figures, the number of Argentines who viewed Russia favorably or very favorably fell from 52% to 27.8% between 2020 and 2023, while that of Brazilians fell from 41.7% to 26.7%, that of Chileans from 47.9% to 23.3% and that of Mexicans from 45.9% to 37.7%.⁵⁴ In other words, Russia's image seriously suffered from the effects of the war in Ukraine. However, another survey conducted by the consulting firm Ipsos in the year 2023 indicated that the percentage of citizens who considered the war in Ukraine as a matter alien to their interests stood at 51 % in Argentina, 38 % in Brazil, 50 % in Chile and 57 % in Mexico.⁵⁵ These figures were striking if contrasted with those of South Africa (41 %) or Singapore (44 %), two countries far removed from the conflict which, nevertheless, seemed to perceive it as closer than a good part of the Latin American respondents. In other words, Russian media efforts had not been able to shield their country's image from the impact of the war; but they had helped to feed the desire for neutrality among public opinion in the region.

Security Relations between Russia and Latin America

Russia has used security cooperation as one of its main tools to try to gain influence in Latin America. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, this became an area of interest for Moscow's potential Latin American partners who sought arms suppliers other than the U.S. as a way to assert their autonomy and glimpsed the possibility of accessing Russian military technology without the ideological risks of dealing with the defunct Soviet Union. However, the Russian defense industry's military penetration has faced obstacles and achieved mixed results.

The Russian defense industry approached Latin America as part of its search for new export markets in the context of its efforts to survive the collapse of the Soviet system and the drastic cutback in demand for armaments following the end of the Cold War. Initially, sales were very modest, as could not be otherwise in a region mostly at peace and under Washington's influence. It was not until the early 2000s that Russian arms accounted for more than 8% of the total military equipment sold to the region. It would be from 2007 onwards that Kremlin exports would skyrocket to become the second largest supplier to the region with over 27% of the market, behind only the combined European suppliers (33.5%) and well above the US (13%).⁵⁶ This expansion of Moscow's arms sales fueled the perception of a rapid growth of the Kremlin's military influence in the region. However, things turned out to be more complex.

The boom of Russian weapons in Latin America was essentially the result of a combination of two factors: the success of a single system and the voracity of a single customer. The system was the Mi-17 helicopter in its various variants and the customer was Venezuela. As for the Mi-17, its sales growth in the region was spectacular. The combination of robustness, easy maintenance and low price, added to the existence of former operators of this aircraft in the region, such as Peru, Cuba and Nicaragua, made the Mi-17 a very attractive option compared to their Western counterparts, the American UH-60 Black Hawk and the H125/ AS332 Super Puma of the European Airbus consortium. As a result, by the beginning of 2014, the number of Russian rotary-wing aircraft in the region had reached 409, of which more than 300 were Mi-17s in operations in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru.⁵⁷

As regards Venezuela, the Chavista regime's desire to break with the US and become a regional power, Washington's decision to impose an arms embargo that prevented the Bolivarian Republic's armed forces from having access to spare parts for their US equipment and the availability of huge oil resources led Caracas to place a series of massive arms orders with Russia. In 2005, Moscow and Caracas signed a first arms sale agreement worth US\$ 2.9 billion which included the purchase of 24 SU-30MK2 fighter-bombers, the most sophisticated aircraft ever delivered by Russia to a Latin American country.⁵⁸ A new agreement was signed in 2009 for the purchase of 92 T-72M medium tanks and S-300VM and Antey-2500 anti-aircraft defense systems, financed with a US\$ 2.2 billion credit from Moscow.⁵⁹ The list of Venezuelan purchases would grow to incorporate 38 Mi-17V-5s helicopters, 10 Mi-35M2 attack helicopters, 3 Mi-25T2 heavy transport helicopters, 12 Tor-M1 self-propelled anti-aircraft defense systems, a number of Buk-2ME anti-aircraft missile launchers, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, 12 9K58 Smerch multiple rocket launchers, 2S23 120 mm self-propelled mortars, an Igla-S portable anti-aircraft missile package and 100.000 AK-103 assault rifles.⁶⁰ According to Russian official sources, the transfers of military equipment between 2005 and 2013 totaled 30 contracts worth US\$11 billion.⁶¹ This gave Caracas an absolute dominant weight within the sales of the Russian defense industry to Latin America. In fact, Venezuela absorbed more than 84% of the total Russian armaments transferred to the region between 2007 and 2016.⁶²

On these two pillars - the Mi-17 helicopter and the Venezuelan market - Moscow sought to expand its sales to the Latin American armed forces. In this effort, the Kremlin developed three types of commercial relations. On the one hand, it made transfers to countries with which it shared hostility toward the U.S. and therefore looked to Russia as an attractive arms supplier. In addition to Chavez's Venezuela, this was the case with Cuba and Nicaragua. However, the difficult Cuban economic situation made any commercial breakthrough virtually impossible outside of talks for the construction of a munitions factory.⁶³ Nicaragua offered some more tangible results thanks to President Daniel Ortega's determination to restore some of the past Cold War splendor to the armed forces. Managua acquired 50 T-72B tanks, 2 Mi-17 helicopters and a number of BMP-1 armored personnel carriers and BM-21 multiple rocket launchers.⁶⁴ In any case, the size of the Nicaraguan military apparatus and the country's economic constraints placed limits on the opportunities for the Russian defense industry.

A second category of Russian defense industry relations focused on countries where Moscow's political influence was less; but its products could count on some competitive advantage, either because they had been used before, or because of

an emphasis on reducing dependence on US systems. These types of conditions favored the purchase of substantial quantities of Mi-17 helicopters in Peru (a former user of this same platform), Mexico (interested in diversifying its fleet with non-US systems) and Colombia (operator of the Mi-17 since the mid-1990s). In any case, attempts to expand sales beyond this type of aircraft encountered strong resistance. This was the case, for example, with the failed proposal to modernize the Peruvian armored fleet with T-90S tanks or the attempt to provide the Colombian Marines with a local version of the BTR-80 armored vehicle.⁶⁵

Finally, Russia also tried to conquer new and much more competitive markets, offering high-tech systems that potential buyers had difficulty obtaining from their usual Western suppliers. The most significant effort in this direction was the attempt to become a privileged supplier of military equipment to Brazil. The first step in this direction resulted in a significant success with the sale of 12 Mi-35 attack helicopters in 2008. However, this project eventually foundered amid serious maintenance problems with these aircraft.⁶⁶ Subsequently, attempts to escalate the business relationship with Brasilia to other more sensitive areas such as the transfer of SU-35 fighter-bombers, the delivery of Pantsir S-1 air defense systems or the development of nuclear-powered submarines failed.⁶⁷ The same can be said of plans to supply MIG-29s or SU-30s to the Argentine Air Force despite the difficulties it has faced until recently in modernizing its fleet with Western systems.⁶⁸

In any case, Russia's presence in the Latin American market proved to be extremely fragile. Russian sales suffered a radical drop between the periods 2012-2016 and 2017-2021 when they went from representing 27 % of the market to just 0.2 %. A number of factors explain this slump. On the one hand, sales of Mi-17 helicopters suffered as a result of a reduction of the market's capacity to absorb more aircraft of this type. On the other hand, the collapse of the Venezuelan economy deprived the Russian defense industry of its star Latin American customer. In addition, Russia showed signs of a very poor ability to adequately sustain the equipment it was selling. Finally, the sanctions imposed on the Kremlin in response to its annexation of Crimea increased the difficulties for Moscow to conquer new regional market niches. This series of changes pushed the Russian defense industry back to the place of irrelevance it had occupied in Latin America before the boom of the 2010s.

The period of expansion of Russian military sales facilitated an increase in contacts between the Russian Armed Forces and their Latin American counterparts. Some of these contacts had essentially symbolic objectives, to demonstrate that Russia had friends and that the West had failed in its attempt to isolate it. Probably the best example of such gestures was President Obrador's invitation for a contingent of Russian soldiers to join the parade commemorating the 213th anniversary of Mexican independence in Mexico City on September 16, 2023, a year and a half after Russia invaded Ukraine.⁶⁹

However, Moscow's military activities have also responded to more strategic reasons. Russian naval aircraft deployments in the Caribbean seek to establish a presence on the periphery of the United States, precisely when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization sits close to Russia's borders. The idea is to create an image of strategic symmetry between the Alliance's proximity to Russia and Moscow's capacity to reach U.S. territory. This was the logic behind the aforementioned visit of Tu-150M1 bombers, which not only landed in Caracas but also in Managua. The same can be said of the presence of Russian ships such as the flotilla that stopped over in Cuba at the end of June 2024 and then headed for Venezuela and the one that followed a

month later.⁷⁰ The truth is that the pretended symmetry between Moscow and Washington is only a mirage and the military relevance of these deployments are more than debatable in view of the lack of supporting infrastructure and maintenance problems afflicting Russian military equipment. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Kremlin's military presence demonstrates its willingness to make its presence felt in the Western Hemisphere and complicates the calculations of U.S. planners.

Moscow has also deployed troops with the aim of providing assistance to the armed forces of its Latin American partners. This has been the case of the deployment of Russian troops in Nicaragua that could reach the figure of about 130 soldiers, mainly intended to provide training and maintenance for equipment delivered by Moscow.⁷¹ A similar mission could have had the hundred or so Russian soldiers deployed in Venezuela in March 2019, who devoted much of their efforts to fine-tuning the air defense systems supplied by Moscow to Caracas.⁷² Indeed, in Nicaragua and Venezuela, the supply of military equipment by Moscow has been accompanied by the establishment of facilities run by Russian military personnel aimed at maintenance, training and intelligence gathering.⁷³

Both the naval aircraft deployments in the Caribbean and the presence of military advisors in Venezuela and Nicaragua also carry a political message from Russia to its Latin American allies: Moscow's willingness and ability to support them in the face of pressure from the US and its domestic opponents. It is about assuring the dictatorships of Nicolas Maduro and Daniel Ortega that Moscow is committed to guaranteeing their survival in exchange for their strategic backing in a similar way as it has done with Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus or Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Indeed, it is significant that the last Russian naval visit to Venezuela at the beginning of August coincided with the political crisis unleashed by the electoral fraud from the Chavist regime in the presidential elections carried out weeks before. The same can be said of the dates chosen for the sending of the aforementioned military contingent in March 2019, just when Nicolas Maduro was facing the rejection by the internal opposition and a large part of the international community of his pretensions to be sworn in as president after fraudulent elections in 2018.

This same implicit agreement - unrestricted support for a repressive regime in exchange for total alignment with Moscow - is behind the role of Russian intelligence services in relations between Moscow and its Latin American allies. In particular, the FSB has played a key role in providing capabilities to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan dictatorships. This support has materialized especially in the improvement of the signal's intelligence capabilities of the political police of these countries. In fact, the Russian security service and the companies that provide it with technical support have introduced the use of the so-called System for Operational Research Activities (SORM, for its acronym in Russian) in Nicaragua.⁷⁴ In addition, the FSB established a training center in Managua, officially intended for the fight against drug trafficking, but which in reality trains intelligence agents at the service of the Nicaraguan regime and other Latin American countries. In parallel, both the FSB and the Russian Main Intelligence Direction of the Major State (GRU, military intelligence) have played a central role in the modernization of the Venezuelan internal security apparatus.⁷⁵

The Economic Dimension of the Russian Strategy

Russia's economic strategy towards Latin America is marked by two main factors. To

begin with, Russia has a small economic weight, which necessarily reduces the impact of its commercial and financial activities. In this respect, its position is diametrically opposed to that of the PRC. While Beijing can rely on in terms of the size of its market or the volume of its financial resources to build relationships in Latin America, Russia is not a major buyer of goods and services from the region, nor does it have sufficient funds to be a major lender. Consequently, it is doomed to be a secondary economic player. On the other hand, the goals it seeks in its economic relations with the region go beyond the mercantile and include political and strategic objectives. In other words, Russia's business management is not exclusively driven by profitability criteria but is also strongly influenced by priorities related to competition with the US and its allies.

Of course, this is not to say that the financial sustainability of its foreign relations is of no concern to the Kremlin. After its disastrous experience in Cuba that left a huge unpaid bill, Moscow has maintained a constant interest in making its foreign adventures viable from an economic perspective. The thing is that behind every commercial or financial decision there are usually strategic interests that often lead to outcomes that lack logic from a purely mercantile perspective. Probably the most obvious example is Venezuela. Caracas has proven to be a disastrous partner in economic terms. The Chavista regime had to resort to a restructuring plan to meet its debt for massive arms purchases.⁷⁶ Similarly, Russian oil giant Rosneft's investment in the Caribbean country turned out to be a lousy deal as a result of the combined effect of international sanctions and the ruinous state of the Venezuelan energy sector. Under these circumstances, Igor Sechin's company sought an agreement to transfer its assets in the Bolivarian Republic to a Russian state-owned company.⁷⁷ However, such fiascos have not caused critical damage to the alliance between Moscow and Caracas.

In this context, Russia has tried to manage its economic interests in the region by trying to find a balance between the demand for profitability and the search for strategic advantages. However, the conditions created by the invasion of Ukraine and the massive international sanctions have pushed the Kremlin to progressively give primacy to the strategic over the mercantile, relegating to second place the possibility of obtaining economic benefits and managing its productive apparatus under a war logic. These conditions have guided the three key lines of action in economic matters deployed by the Kremlin: investments, trade and loans.

In the first area, the Kremlin's investments have been concentrated in the areas in which the Russian economy has the greatest experience, particularly in the extractive sector. A substantial part of this effort has been oriented towards hydrocarbons. Beyond the difficult venture in Venezuela, where the company continues to operate, Rosneft has developed projects in Cuba and Brazil, which granted it permission to operate in the Solimões basin, in the Amazon region.⁷⁸ In addition, Lukoil has made an investment valued at 435 million dollars to exploit oil in Mexican waters.⁷⁹ Other initiatives have been associated with the mining sector. Such was the case of the acquisition of a nickel mine in Guatemala in 2011 by Solway, a business conglomerate based in Switzerland, but under Russian control. Within this same category, investments by the aluminum giant RUSAL in Jamaica and Guyana should also be included.⁸⁰ Similarly, mention should be made of the agreement between the Bolivian government and the Russian nuclear industry giant Rosatom for the exploitation of lithium in collaboration with the Chinese company Citic Guoan Group.⁸¹

All these investments have represented bets to control resources with high strategic value - energy, aluminum, nickel, lithium - and have frequently been accompanied by political maneuvers, overt or covert, aimed at giving Moscow a decisive advantage over potential competitors. This has been the case with projects in Venezuela and Cuba where the Kremlin's ties with both regimes have made it almost inevitable that the projects have ended up in Moscow's hands. On occasion where Russia does not have such privileged access, it has been common for its companies to be involved in illegal activities. Apart from the aforementioned Rosatom case, some analysts point to the possibility that RUSAL was connected to an attempt to interfere with the elections in Guyana in order to defend its commercial interests.⁸² Solway's project in Guatemala has been subject to sanctions by the U.S. Treasury Department due to its responsibility in the development of an extensive corruption network for the benefit of its operation.⁸³

In terms of trade, Russia has been a minor partner for most Latin American countries. However, when the opportunity has presented itself, it has not hesitated to use economic exchanges as a lever to obtain political concessions. The most visible case has been the aforementioned Ecuador. Moscow blocked exports of Ecuadorian flowers and bananas in response to Quito's plans to deliver the Russian-made equipment of its armed forces to USA. Faced with the risk of losing a trade partner that had brought the national economy \$721 million in benefits by 2023, the government of Daniel Noboa cancelled the agreement with Washington.⁸⁴ Although in a more subtle way, the threat of economic boycotts has floated in some decisions in favor of Russia taken by other Latin American governments. During negotiations with the Argentinean administration of President Mauricio Macri to prevent RT's signal from being removed from public television in 2015, Russian authorities toyed with the possibility of suspending meat imports from the southern country and denying funding for the construction of the Chihuido dam.⁸⁵ Faced with such a prospect, the Russian channel has continued to broadcast in Argentina.

More recently, the possible consequences of an economic rupture with Russia have also been put forward as an argument to explain the careful neutrality shown by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva when talking about the war in Ukraine. The truth is that Brazilian diplomacy has always sought to maintain a cordial relationship with Russia insofar as it coincides with Moscow in its interest in reducing US preponderance and building a multipolar international order. In addition, Brazil presents a key economic vulnerability insofar as its agricultural production represents 30% of its exports and receives 25% of Russia's fertilizers.⁸⁶ In this context, guaranteeing the arrival of fertilizers in the midst of the war in Ukraine became a priority to maintain the health of the South American giant's economy which, undoubtedly, was a factor to be considered in order not to escalate the rhetoric against Moscow's international behavior.⁸⁷

Finally, although with very limited financial resources, Russia has also used its loans as a tool to gain influence. In this sense, Moscow has oriented its loans to support allied countries in projects of interest to Russia.⁸⁸ This has meant that the Kremlin's financiers have focused on Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia. Russian loans have had little presence in the rest of Latin America, insofar as most governments in the region had alternative sources of money and were not interested in the type of projects the Kremlin offered to finance.

As already mentioned, the Kremlin's financial experience with Cuba and Venezuela has been very negative. The enormous debt accumulated by Havana during Soviet

times - some \$32 billion - was 90% written off by Vladimir Putin in 2013. With the remaining funds, the Kremlin financed some investments on the island, including Rosneft's stake in the Cienfuegos refinery.⁸⁹ Russia also offered a €1.2 billion loan for the construction of a thermal power plant in 2015, which Havana had to renegotiate in view of its inability to repay it in 2023.⁹⁰ Despite these difficulties, Rosneft has resumed the delivery of oil cargoes to the island with no clarity as to how they will be paid.⁹¹ As for Venezuela, Moscow has been forced to continue financing Caracas to prevent the collapse of the Chavista regime, particularly after the PRC was reluctant to grant new loans. As a result, it is estimated that Venezuelan debt to the Russian government and Rosneft had reached \$17 billion by 2019.⁹² Since then, Caracas has made some partial payments; but at the same time repayment of the entire debt has become more urgent for Moscow, which faces its own financial straits as a result of international sanctions.

Financial relations between Russia and Bolivia have been smoother, although not without ups and downs. Moscow offered funding for the construction of a nuclear research reactor by Rosatom in El Alto. However, the fall from power of Evo Morales in 2019 stalled the project. Russian cooperation would only be reactivated in 2020, following the arrival in government of Luis Arce, a member of the same political group as Morales. In this new context, plans would resume to complete the construction of the nuclear research center in 2025 and the aforementioned agreement for the exploitation of lithium deposits would be signed.⁹³

Conclusions: The Risks of Belittling the Kremlin

Assessing the impact of Russia's strategy towards Latin America requires taking into consideration its objectives and also Moscow's means to achieve them. Following the debacle of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Russia's return to the region was conceived by the Kremlin's foreign policy establishment as part of a global exercise to regain great power status. This effort translated into three goals at the regional level. On the one hand, the construction of a network of alliances that would include former Cold War partners - Cuba and Nicaragua - and extend to new governments -Venezuela and Bolivia- if possible. On the other hand, the transformation of the region into a neutral space where US control would be reduced, and Russia would gain influence. Finally, the development of a privileged relationship with Brazil and Mexico - the two major regional players - that would contribute to building a multipolar world order more permeable to Russian interests.

This project collided with a very difficult strategic reality. During the Cold War, the defunct Soviet Union had failed in its attempt to penetrate the Western Hemisphere due to its reduced capacity to project force, the rejection of Latin American countries and the overwhelming presence of the U.S. In fact, its only visible success was to turn Cuba into a vassal state that it had to subsidize for three decades. With this background, Vladimir Putin's Latin American enterprise had little prospect of success, even less so if one takes into consideration that neither the productive structure nor the Russian Armed Forces were comparable to those wielded by the USSR at the time.

In this way, it is easy to understand the fiascos that have peppered Russia's Latin American strategy. There is the way in which the Kremlin has been trapped by partners like Cuba and Venezuela that have demanded permanent political, economic and security backing in order to survive. The same can be said of the inability of its defense industry to consolidate its presence in the Latin American

market. Likewise, it is also worth highlighting Russia's scarce economic penetration in the region, beyond captive and unprofitable markets such as Venezuela and Cuba.

Despite all these problems, it should also be emphasized to what extent Moscow has been able to take advantage of the geopolitical gaps in the region to advance its objectives and transform the region into a more benign space for its interests. The Kremlin has consolidated a network of satellite states that includes not only the former Cuban and Nicaraguan vassals of the Soviet Union but also Chavista Venezuela. Certainly, these are corrupt, incompetent and impoverished regimes; but they provide Moscow with a bridgehead in the hemisphere and represent an example of survival from which other would-be dictators can draw inspiration.

In addition, the region has become a more competitive space over which Russia has no control, nor does the U.S. Many Latin American capitals have ignored U.S. reticence when it comes to initiating projects of high strategic value with Russia, be it the acquisition of military equipment or the exploitation of mineral resources. Likewise, no country in the region has accompanied Washington in taking practical measures against Moscow for its aggressions and massive human rights violations in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Central African Republic, Mali and so on. Moreover, the Kremlin has been able to develop channels of communication with Latin American political and economic elites that have given it a level of access and influence in the region that it has never enjoyed before. In particular, Moscow has built a privileged relationship with Mexico and Brasilia, which have condoned Russian international behavior in exchange for potential advantages in terms of political support, commercial exchanges and technological cooperation.

What has been most striking about these changes has been their resilience to attempts by Washington and its European allies to reverse them. U.S. and EU efforts to push for a democratic opening within Russia's satellite regimes in the region - Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela - have failed miserably. Similarly, U.S. and European efforts to get the region to join the coalition against Moscow for the aggression against Kyiv have been equally frustrating. In other words, Washington and its European allies have been ineffective in restoring the status quo that Russia's entry into the region has been instrumental in dislocating.

Of course, not all the credit for the evolution of Latin America in the direction of Russian interests goes to Vladimir Putin and his international advisors. The existence of an anti-American sentiment among part of the Latin American elites, the massive landing of the PRC in the region and an unjustified complacency in the US and Europe based on the assumption that the region was predestined to join the community of liberal democracies have substantially contributed to creating a favorable space for Moscow.

But it would be analytically wrong to ignore the Kremlin's successes in its approach to the region. Russian planners have constructed a good strategic design by taking into consideration their limited resources and distinguishing between the opportunities they could seize and the spaces that lay beyond their reach. They have been determined in their support for the Nicaraguan regime, for example, but more timid in gaining influence in other Central American countries. Moreover, they have demonstrated a remarkable ability to choose how best to apply their scarce resources. There is the way in which a marginal economic player like Russia has employed economic coercion on several occasions to bend the will of some Latin American governments. Moscow has also been willing to take risks when they were

convenient to enlarge its weight in the region. Air naval deployments executed with very limited military means are an example of aggressive gestures that have relied on the lack of American response to enhance the Kremlin's credibility. Finally, Moscow's strategy has been remarkably consistent over time. Seemingly immune to failure and criticism, it has remained open to opportunities as they presented themselves. Rosatom's vicissitudes in Bolivia are a testament to this determination.

As it is, the time seems to have come to stop belittling Russia as a player in Latin America. Despite its limited resources, it has demonstrated the will and ability to alter the hemisphere's status quo. On this basis, Moscow promises to nurture two key challenges for the near future. On the one hand, it will continue to promote authoritarianism, seeking to replicate the criminal state model it has so painstakingly helped build in Venezuela and Nicaragua. On the other hand, it will strive to turn the region into a hostile space for the US and Europe, nurturing anti- Western actors and sentiments in a similar way as it does in the Middle East and Africa. If the US and Europe do not want that future for Latin America, they need a strategy to confront the Kremlin.

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