



THE IMPACT OF WAR IN UKRAINE ON LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

AUTHORS

DAVID J. KRAMER
VLADIMIR ROUVINSKI
ANDREI SERBIN PONT

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RUSSIA AND LATIN AMERICA AFTER FEBRUARY 24

By David J. Kramer

February 24 was a day that rocked the European continent, with reverberations felt worldwide. That, of course, was the day Russia invaded Ukraine for the second time (the first occurred in 2014). Several months later, thousands of Ukrainians have been killed, millions have been displaced, and damage in the billions of dollars has been inflicted on the Ukrainian nation.

At the same time, Russia's military campaign has been an abysmal failure, as Russian President Vladimir Putin has not succeeded in decapitating the Ukrainian government, seizing the capital Kyiv, or avoiding massive losses—estimated to be more than 30,000 troops and nearly a dozen generals. Many democratic countries have imposed massive sanctions on Putin's regime and on Russia more broadly. Putin himself has been sanctioned, making him politically radioactive for all intents and purposes.

The situation remains fluid as this goes to print, with intense fighting in the east and south of Ukraine, but it seems that Ukraine, if Western help increases, could prevail while Russia could suffer a massive defeat not just on the battlefield but well beyond. Ukrainians have displayed remarkable courage and determination in defending their land and their freedom. Ukraine clearly is the victim in this situation; Russia is the inarguable aggressor and guilty party. And yet that is not a view shared everywhere, including in Latin America.

While it is too soon to draw concrete conclusions about what the Russian invasion of Ukraine will mean for Russia's position in Latin America, here are some preliminary assessments:

- 1) Maintaining normal relations with Moscow has become much more complicated. Traveling to Moscow to meet with Putin, for example, will be much harder to justify for any leader in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC); the same is true for receiving Russian officials in Latin American capitals. In addition to Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and most Russian of-

ficials have been sanctioned. That makes them *persona non grata*. Unless and until the war stops, that status is unlikely to change. Even then, Latin American governments will need to think twice about such visits.

- 2) In light of the massive sanctions regime imposed on Putin and Russia, dealing and doing business with Russia are and will remain more complicated than before. Russian firms sanctioned by the United States and other allies are essentially off-limits for Latin American counterparts who would otherwise risk being hit with secondary sanctions, even if countries in the region have not adopted sanctions themselves against Russia.
- 3) Russia's abysmal military performance in Ukraine will likely make Russian weapons and arms less attractive to potential buyers. Poor planning and logistics have had a lot to do with Russian forces' inability to achieve their objectives, but scenes of Ukrainian tractors pulling damaged and disabled Russian tanks will not be good for Russia's arms business.
- 4) The fact that Russia is bogged down in Ukraine means it is less likely to have the resources—political, economic, military, even human—to extend much further into Latin America. The temptation to stick it to the United States in what Moscow perceives as the United States' sphere of influence will be considerable, but the ability to match that temptation with actual capabilities will be limited.
- 5) As long as Latin American audiences pay attention to and are afforded factual information about what is happening in Ukraine, they should see that the propaganda *RT en Español* and *Sputnik* have fed them is pure hogwash. The information war in the region, in which Russia had been making real headway, might shift away from Moscow's favor.
- 6) All that said, Latin America's reaction to the invasion has been mixed at best. The lack of a united stance risks creating openings for Moscow to exploit down the road.

Russia's Invasion Was no Surprise

The U.S. intelligence community and other Western agencies had strong reason to believe that Putin had decided to invade and made their predictions public. Putin had massively built up Russian forces along the border with Ukraine in spring 2021 and, after a pause and even a slight pullback of forces for a few months, did so again in the fall and through the winter in an even more threatening manner. Putin did this despite securing a June summit with President Joseph R. Biden in Geneva, an invitation Biden had extended to try to forestall the invasion.

By early this year, the prospect of a Russian invasion loomed even larger over Ukraine and the international stage. And yet two presidents from Latin America, for reasons still not entirely clear, decided that February, the month of the invasion, would be a good time to visit Moscow and meet with the Russian president. Those visits by Argentine President Alberto Fernandez and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro looked like bad ideas at the time. They look even worse after Putin gave the green light for Russian forces to invade Ukraine shortly after their visits.

Buddying up to Putin was never a good look for Latin American leaders, particularly for presidents of two countries that have had good relations with the United States. And yet both leaders seemed more interested in striking an independent stance from Washington than taking a principled stand. Both leaders played right into the Kremlin's efforts to use the Latin American card over the United States.

Now, such trips to Moscow should be a thing of the past. Putin oversees a rogue regime accused of war crimes that no duly elected leader, whether in Latin America or anywhere else for that matter, should be jetting off to Moscow to meet. And certainly, hosting Putin or any top Russian official should not be under consideration for any democracies in the region. Even for countries with close ties to Moscow, meeting with top Russian officials would be ill-advised.

Sanctioned Russian officials who might want to visit Latin America will have difficulty doing so. When Lavrov sought to travel to Belgrade in June, he had to scuttle his trip because several countries over which his plane would have flown denied him clearance. The same would happen if he or other Russian officials sought to

visit countries in Latin America.

For decades, Russia has maintained strong ties with communist Cuba and the Ortega regime in Nicaragua. Russian support for Venezuela's illegitimate leader Nicolás Maduro has been key to propping him up in power. But for the leaders of Argentina and Brazil to travel to Moscow as international tensions were heating up over Russia's growing threat to Ukraine was unseemly.

Returning the Favor

Putin believes that the United States and the West more broadly—including NATO and the European Union (EU)—are interfering in Russia's sphere of influence. Putin's zero-sum mentality makes him want to mess with what he perceives as the United States' sphere of influence in Latin America. Russian officials even threatened earlier this year to deploy new military assets in the region in a clear response to Western pledges of support to Ukraine, a presence that has been growing for years, even before the invasion of Ukraine.¹

Russia completely refurbished the Nicaraguan Armed Forces between 2016 and 2017 and built and operates a large, high-tech communications facility on the outskirts of its capital, Managua. Russian strategic bombers have visited Venezuela, and the presence of war vessels in the Caribbean is not unusual. In June, Nicaragua's authoritarian leader Daniel Ortega authorized Russian troops, planes, and ships to deploy to Nicaragua for training, law enforcement, or emergency response.² He also permitted small contingents of Russian soldiers in Nicaragua for an "exchange of experiences and training." Whether Russia will follow through on this is questionable, given how stretched its forces are in Ukraine, but the announcement was designed to annoy the United States.

Russia views countries in the region as ripe targets for expanding military sales. Yet Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine may dampen the interest in other countries, including Latin America, in obtaining Russian arms.

Indeed, all this may be much more difficult for Moscow in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. While there may be an even stronger desire to enhance its profile in Latin America in response to Western military assistance to Ukraine, Russian forces are bogged down in

Ukraine, where Ukrainians have put up a heroic and determined fight against the invading forces. That means Russia's ability to extend its position, send its planes, sell more arms, and prop up regimes in the region has been compromised. That the United States and many other democracies have imposed an unprecedented sanctions regime on Russia means that buying Russian arms risks violating those sanctions. That should give Latin American governments pause.

Moreover, the Kremlin has been forced to recall Russian forces, including Wagner mercenaries, from Syria, Libya, and other places to reinforce their embattled troops in Ukraine.³ That suggests that bolstering Russia's physical presence in Latin America, whether through traditional or non-traditional actors, is unlikely for the foreseeable future. The botched invasion of Ukraine and the need to scramble to staunch the bleeding there—literally and figuratively—have exposed the limits on Russia's power projection capabilities. That is bound to have an impact on Russia's profile in Latin America.

Even Russian disinformation and propaganda in LAC might have to take a back seat to an all-hands-on-deck approach to Ukraine. *RT en Español*, headquartered in Chile, may be strapped for resources and more limited in its ability to win over Latin American audiences and sow doubts about America's reliability as a partner, given that RT is struggling to win over audiences closer to home with its twisted propaganda. The sanctions and their effects on the Russian economy and revenue streams will make resourcing RT more challenging. Some countries have even expelled RT from their airwaves and broadcast networks, a step some democratic governments in Latin America should also consider. Such a move would not be anti-democratic because Russia is at war with its neighbor, and by extension, with large parts of the globe. Allowing such a regime to spew its hate-filled and inaccurate rhetoric is morally wrong.

The sanctions regime also threatens Russia's ability to maintain its 18 embassies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Trade with Russia, with Mexico and Brazil being the largest partners, is also in jeopardy in light of the sanctions. Aside from military sales, Russian exports consist mostly of metals, fertilizers, and minerals. In the past 20 years, Russian trade with Lat-

in America has tripled. Now, as a result of invading Ukraine, it may plummet, cutting off a desperately needed source of revenue—some US\$14.1 billion in 2019—at a time when Russian sources of income are drying up. For Latin American companies, doing business in Russia or with Russian companies in their countries has become very complicated and risks incurring significant costs through secondary sanctions.

China and other resource-rich countries may look to fill the void, and the United States would be wise to tap into some of these newly-opened market opportunities. At the same time, some Latin American countries may benefit,⁴ at least in the short term, from the growing food crisis caused by Russia's blockade of Ukraine's access to the Black Sea. Argentina, a major wheat exporter, may try to fill the gap left by impediments to exports of Ukrainian wheat, for example.

The goodwill produced by deliveries of Russian-manufactured COVID vaccines, known as Sputnik, during the pandemic—part of its vaccine diplomacy competition with the United States—is unlikely to mitigate the damage done to Russia's reputation from the invasion of Ukraine. As it is, questions about the efficacy of the Russian vaccines raised doubts about Moscow as a reliable partner in public health.

Test in the United Nations

A month after the invasion of Ukraine, countries around the world faced a test of where they stood: with Kyiv or Moscow. In a March 24 vote before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on whether to condemn Russia for its actions, 140 countries voted with the resolution, 39 abstained, and five voted against it. Among Latin American and Caribbean countries, none voted against the resolution, leaving Russia with only Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea and Syria. Four Latin American countries—Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—voted to abstain.

Voting in favor of the resolution were 27 LAC countries. Two countries—Dominica and Venezuela—did not vote (Venezuela lost its right to vote for non-payment of UN dues). Such a result could not have pleased Moscow and would suggest either that its investment to win over countries in Latin America was not working or

that its invasion was so beyond the pale that even countries normally sympathetic to Russia had no choice but to vote to condemn or abstain.

Another test came a few weeks later when the UNGA voted on whether to expel Russia from its seat on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). And while Russia still lost that vote, it did so with fewer countries opposed to it than in the previous UNGA resolution. To be clear, Russia's membership in the UNHRC makes a mockery of the institution, given the country's appalling human rights record, as it teeters from being authoritarian to totalitarian. That said, only 93 countries felt Russia's invasion of Ukraine merited it being kicked off the UNHRC; 24 voted against and 58 abstained.

A look at how countries in Latin America and the Caribbean voted shows more support for Russia on this vote compared to the vote in late March. Nineteen countries voted in favor of kicking Russia off the Human Rights Council. Cuba joined Bolivia and Nicaragua as the only countries in the region to oppose the resolution. Ten countries from the region abstained: El Salvador, Mexico, Brazil (perhaps reflecting a benefit for Moscow from Bolsonaro's February visit), Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. Both Brazil and Mexico hold seats on the UN Security Council. Some countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua—like Russia are members of the UNHRC—may have worried about facing similar scrutiny and losing their seats on it in the future.

Challenges to Maintaining Unity Against Russia

Over time, maintaining unity, including a tough sanctions regime against Moscow, may prove challenging, especially as the war has an impact on energy and food supplies around the world. A report issued jointly by the UN World Food Program and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) warned that the effects of the Ukraine crisis might soon exacerbate food insecurity in the Caribbean region.⁵ Inflation, a problem before February 24, has been made worse by the invasion, which may trigger some outside powers to encourage a negotiated settlement to stop the fighting. The Ukrainians, however, are confident in their ability to

prevail in the conflict. In a recent survey,⁶ 97 percent expressed confidence that Ukraine will prevail—and are determined to push Russian forces off their territory. That suggests the conflict could drag on for a while—unless the Russian side experiences a total breakdown and collapse, a possibility that cannot be ruled out.

For the United States, relying on Russia to self-destruct and weaken its position in Latin America is insufficient. The Biden administration needs to pursue an active campaign to undermine Russia's standing in the region. Recent U.S. overtures to Cuba and Venezuela may be the first steps in such a strategy to try to drive a wedge between Moscow and its two closest allies in the region. Whether that is the right approach, disputes between Washington and Latin American counterparts over the agenda and invitation list for the U.S.-hosted June Summit of the Americas showcased disagreements between Washington and LAC countries that don't bode well for the administration's efforts to enhance its position at Moscow's expense.

Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, usually strong critics of intervention in general, voted against Russia in the two resolutions before the UN Security Council, but none of them has joined other democracies in imposing sanctions on the Putin regime. Nor have they suspended military, cultural, and sports ties with Moscow. In late April, all three abstained on a resolution at the Organization of American States that suspended Russia as a permanent observer of the 34-country group; 25 countries voted to do so.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro's visit to Moscow would seem a ripe subject for criticism in the upcoming election, but his primary challenger's views on Russia's invasion do not appear any better. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva told *Time* magazine in early May that the United States, EU, and Ukraine itself bear as much responsibility for the war as Putin.⁷ "Putin shouldn't have invaded Ukraine," Lula said, "But it's not just Putin who is guilty. The U.S. and the EU are also guilty. What was the reason for the Ukraine invasion? NATO? Then the U.S. and Europe should have said: 'Ukraine won't join NATO! That would have solved the problem,'" he said, almost parroting Kremlin talking points. He went on to blast Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, claiming, "This guy [Zelenskyy] is as respon-

sible as Putin for the war. Because in the war, there's not just one person guilty ... He did want war." Therefore, a change in leadership in Brazil after elections this fall might not produce much change in Brazilian views toward Russia.

In Mexico, MORENA, the party of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in a politically tone-deaf step, launched a Mexico-Russia "Friendship Committee" in March—*after* Russia's invasion. At a ceremony for the launch of the committee, as reported by Andres Oppenheimer, Russian Ambassador Viktor Koronelli was the honored guest at the ceremony, where he praised López Obrador's self-proclaimed neutrality on the conflict.⁸ In his daily press briefing that same day, López Obrador said, "Our posture is neutrality."

Conclusion

For countries in Latin America claiming to be democratic, neutrality simply is the wrong stance to take. Contrary to the view of Lula and others, responsibility for the crisis lies squarely on Russia's shoulders. Neither Ukraine, NATO, nor the EU did anything to warrant such a barbarous attack that has included clear evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁹ The invasion represents a clear violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Maintaining a position of neutrality on this issue is tantamount to supporting the Kremlin.

The United States needs to do a better job of encouraging more support from Latin American allies for a hardline position toward Moscow. It must make clear the choice countries in the region face. Through quiet diplomacy as well as naming and shaming when and where necessary, Washington should plainly state that when it comes to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now is the time to choose sides—and that the right side to be on is with Ukraine and the democratic countries that have rallied behind it.

Such an approach should entail a more aggressive effort to provide factual news and information to the region about what Russia is really up to in Ukraine—the war crimes and slaughter of innocent civilians—through a more aggressive public diplomacy campaign, including ramping up internet and broadcasting efforts. Washington should urge friendly LAC governments to

cut off access for *RT en Español* since its purpose is to spread dangerous propaganda, not real news.

The United States needs to encourage more investment and business in LAC to step in where Russian activity has ceased or become problematic. The alternative otherwise might come from Beijing, which is already working to extend its influence in the region in place of Russia's. Indeed, China is likely to move quickly to try to fill any openings created by Moscow's distraction in Ukraine. That argues even more for a proactive campaign by the United States to fill those gaps and not let China do so. The United States cannot passively sit back and hope that Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine will create opportunities it can take advantage of. It must ramp up its game and seize this moment in the hemisphere before others do.

David J. Kramer is the Bradford M. Freeman Managing Director of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the George W. Bush administration. He also is a Senior Fellow in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at FIU.

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WAR IN UKRAINE WILL LEAD TO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN RUSSIAN-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS

By Vladimir Rouvinski

Introduction

The Russian war in Ukraine came as a surprise to many decision-makers in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Despite the growing concentration of Russian troops on the border before the attack and the public warnings by the U.S. government on the war's inevitability, the scale of the invasion and the changing justifications offered by the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin to explain the unprovoked attack of the neighboring nation made it difficult for many political leaders in the region to take a firm stand regarding Russian warfare in Europe swiftly. In addition, there were other reasons for the indecisiveness of a number of Latin American nations.

On the one hand, shortly before the war began, the leaders of Argentina and Brazil went to Russia and expressed their support for Putin's foreign policy.¹ At the same time, Russia's First Prime Minister Yury Borisov visited Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba just days before the war started and promised to broaden military cooperation with vital Russian allies in the Western Hemisphere.² Therefore, in the context of the unfolding war in Ukraine, the leaders of Brazil and Argentina experienced difficulties finding a way to distance themselves from Russia, at least during the initial phase of the war. In contrast, while expressing their support to Putin, Caracas, Managua, and Havana had to be careful not to give the impression that the war in Ukraine may be extended speedily to the region, using their nations as Russia's gateway.

On the other hand, traditional U.S. allies in the region like Colombia used the crisis in Ukraine as an opportunity to reconfirm their commitment to the established world order and offered unconditional approval of the U.S. and European position about the conflict.³ Still, while Bogota's rhetoric was met by fury in Moscow and the Russian envoy to the United Nations (UN) used

the presentation by the Colombian president at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to attack Colombia directly,⁴ the Colombian government did not turn its words into action. Colombia continued to maintain its diplomatic and trade relations with Russia.

Against the above background, the lack of consensus among important Latin American nations on the Russian war in Ukraine benefited Moscow by offering the Kremlin an opportunity to claim that the United States and the Western powers failed to achieve the desired isolation of Russia in the international arena.⁵ Although recent revelations about atrocities committed by the Russian troops in Ukraine forced some indecisive Latin American governments to condemn Russia's modus operandi publicly, to date, not one nation in the region has taken full-scale measures similar to those adopted by the U.S. and European governments.

For instance, no Latin American country expelled Russian diplomats, despite the latter having disseminated misleading Russian narratives about the war. The Russian government-controlled media outlets have continued their information operations in the region. No Latin American nation has joined the United States, Europe, and several other countries worldwide by introducing economic sanctions against Moscow. Moreover, the shifting political pattern in the region toward the left and the growing popularity of the "active non-alliance" approach as an alternative foreign policy strategy⁶ offers Russia the potential to use its relations with this part of the Western Hemisphere to continue advancing Moscow's reciprocity strategy,⁷ a driving force behind Russia's engagement with the region during the last two decades. After all, since Latin American countries do not consider their security directly threatened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and some continue to view the Russian market as potentially beneficial, governments in the region took a wait-and-see attitude. At the same time, to better understand the reasons behind the reaction of Latin America to the war in Ukraine and future scenarios, it is necessary to take a closer look at some of the bilateral relations built by post-Soviet Russia with LAC nations.

The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Russia's Bilateral Relations in Latin America

Concerning Russia's engagement with the region after the Cold War, two groups of countries can be distinguished by considering the most critical aspects of their bilateral relations with Moscow. The first group includes Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Russia has attempted to forge multifaceted connections with the trio, including economic and military cooperation, and has developed strong political ties. However, the majority of Latin American states belong to the second group, which has stable economic relations with Russia, although unequal in terms of trade and commerce. Yet, the degree of their political cooperation is mainly dependent on the ideological preferences of the successive governments. This is the case for Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, some of the most important actors in the region. Moreover, the victory of the left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro in the Colombian presidential elections in June 2022 may lead to changes in Colombia's foreign policy. As shown below, challenges and opportunities can be identified for members of both groups.

Venezuela

For the last 20 years, Venezuela has served as Moscow's gateway to the region and become a vital part of the Kremlin's reciprocity strategy. In exchange for the *Chavista* government's full support of Russia's 2008 war in the Caucasus and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow supplied weapons to the Venezuelan army, while Russian private and state-owned companies invested heavily in the Venezuelan energy sector.⁸ Later on, Putin's Russia offered a lifeline to Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro government by making multibillion-dollar advance payments for Venezuelan oil and helping Venezuela bypass U.S. sanctions.⁹ In 2019, Russia sent military technical personnel to the South American country, thus confirming Putin's commitment to keeping Venezuela in the Russian orbit.¹⁰ As a result, during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, the United States had to recognize Russia as a key player in the Venezuelan scenario through direct bilateral negotiations between the United States and Russia on Venezuela.¹¹

Yet, the Russian advance to Venezuela came at a price: In 2020, Rosneft had to abandon all its assets in the country under U.S. pressure. Although Russia managed to transfer Rosneft's holdings to a shadow Russia's government-owned company, it evidenced the vulnerability of Moscow's engagement and cast doubts on the continuation of tangible Russian support to Venezuela. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Caracas approved the Russian standing in the war.¹² At the same time, Venezuela agreed to start negotiations with the United States in March 2022, which represented a significant setback for Russian interests and may signal a potential change in full-scale Venezuelan commitment to the Kremlin.¹³ The fact is that the Kremlin is rapidly losing its former attractiveness to the Maduro regime as a middleman who helped smuggle Venezuelan oil and provided other material support. Russian appeal as a powerful nation that could back Venezuela in the international arena has also diminished following the exclusion of Moscow from many important international structures, including the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁴ Therefore, it is unlikely that Russian-Venezuelan relations will continue as they were after the 2022 Ukrainian war.

Due to changing U.S. policy toward Venezuela in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, Maduro has new opportunities to balance Russian influence by establishing working contacts with Washington, which are emerging due to U.S. concerns regarding the availability of oil and Venezuela as part of a possible solution.¹⁵ In this scenario, the Putin government would need to make an extra effort to keep the alliance strong. However, considering the impact of Western sanctions and the costs associated with the war in Ukraine, Russian material capacities are more limited. Therefore, it would be difficult for Moscow to allocate new tangible resources that Maduro wishes for—including expanded military cooperation—while other states may be willing to restart their economic relations with Caracas, even if only partially. Hence, the future of Russian-Venezuelan relations is in jeopardy.

Nicaragua

In the case of Nicaragua, in the recent past, the government of President Daniel Ortega has developed a great degree of dependence on Russian political support, and there are Russian military training installations on Nicaraguan soil. Nonetheless, Russian relations with Nicaragua are suffering from the limitation of tangible resources, similar to Venezuela. For that reason, the switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in late 2021 and Managua's abstention in voting on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's war in Ukraine (China did the same)¹⁶ evidences the change in Nicaragua's approach to Russia and its willingness to strengthen further collaboration with Beijing. Another indication of Managua's changing course in its relations with Russia is that Ortega refused to meet Russian Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, who arrived in Nicaragua for an official visit on February 24, 2022, the day Russia attacked Ukraine.¹⁷ As in the case of Venezuela, Russia has to demonstrate that it remains useful to Managua in the emerging regional and global political and economic arrangements. The Ortega government became accustomed to rewards from the Kremlin, political and economic, for small but symbolically significant—for Russia—gestures like the 2008 diplomatic recognition of Georgia's separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and for opening Nicaraguan ports for Russian military vessels. However, the experienced ruler of Nicaragua would prefer to wait until the economically-weakened Putin government can prove it is still capable of rewarding Ortega for his support of Russian actions in Ukraine.¹⁸

Cuba

Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in challenges and opportunities for Russian-Cuban relations. From the beginning of the invasion, the position of Havana has been purposefully ambiguous. While the government of Miguel Diaz-Canel lamented the loss of human lives in Ukraine, Cuba abstained from condemning Russia explicitly for these losses.¹⁹ This is because Havana cannot afford to distance itself too much from Russia: Cuba uses its ties with Putin's Russia to balance Cuban relations with the United States. Therefore, Cuba avoids openly criticizing Russia and maintains an ambiguous political

narrative, keeping the maneuvering space wide open.

At the same time, like Venezuela and Nicaragua, Havana is aware of the limitations in obtaining aid from Russia, which it desperately needs to keep the troubled Cuban economy afloat. While several joint projects had been announced before the war in Ukraine started, there are reasonable doubts they will be implemented under the current circumstances. In addition, highly publicized Russian aid to Cuba has had little real impact on the improvement of ordinary Cubans' living conditions in the long term.²⁰ Besides, the statements by some high-level Russian diplomats about the possibility of placing offensive weapons on the island²¹ were deemed irresponsible by Cubans.²² The suggestions about expanding Russia's military presence on the island did not develop further. In addition, Cuba and Ukraine maintain diplomatic relations.²³

Cuba is likely to look for new opportunities to improve its relations with the United States and not expose itself to the risks associated with Russian interests in the Western Hemisphere. For example, despite Moscow expressing its interest in developing closer ties with the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), controlled by Cuba and Venezuela, Russia was not invited to ALBA's May 22 summit in Havana. Moreover, while the summit's final declaration did not explicitly mention the war in Ukraine, it did state the need for a peaceful resolution of international conflicts, which can be interpreted as the disapproval of the Russian military invasion in Ukraine.²⁴

Mexico

The divisions by ideological lines in contemporary Mexican politics echoed Mexico's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has many supporters among the ruling MORENA party, to which President Andrés Manuel López Obrador belongs. This is one reason why Russia continues to have opportunities to engage Mexican public opinion with its narratives regarding the war in Ukraine. For instance, in March 2022, the Mexican parliament hosted a special session to celebrate the work of the Mexico-Russia interparliamentary commission. Russian diplomats joined pro-Russian Mexican deputies condemning the U.S. policy, which they claim led to the war in Ukraine.²⁵ Russian and Mex-

ican mass media provided extensive reporting on this event, allowing Moscow to expose its position to millions of Mexicans. However, the government of López Obrador also had to consider Mexican economic dependence on the United States and chose to become a sponsor, together with France, of the UN General Assembly resolution demanding the end of the war in Ukraine.²⁶ In the future, Mexico will likely limit engagement with Russia because of the importance of the U.S. factor in its international and domestic policies.

Argentina

In many aspects, Argentina shares Russia's position on the need for power rearrangements on the global stage. In this context, and although Argentinian President Alberto Fernández eventually condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, he nevertheless allowed the Russian Embassy in Argentina and Russian media outlets to disseminate Moscow's official discourse freely to Argentinians. Moreover, Argentina sustained plans for economic collaboration with Russia and continues other interactions such as cultural and education cooperation. Overall, the government of Argentina tilted the balance more toward the acquittal of the actions of the Russian government than defending the human rights of Ukrainians. In this respect, Fernández's position differs sharply from the United States and other Western countries, allowing Russia to mislead ordinary Argentinians regarding its goals in Ukraine.

Brazil

Brazil is amid an electoral campaign, and the current President, Jair Bolsonaro, is seeking reelection. At the same time, his country depends on Russia's critical supply of fertilizers.²⁷ Likewise, given the high degree of uncertainty regarding the war's outcome in Ukraine and emerging new power alignments, Brazil is interested in continuing BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a symbol of Brazil's global reach. This is one of the reasons why Brasilia evaded providing full support to the United States and its Western allies and did not impose any sanctions on Russia. The statements by the Brazilian president are identical to those of other Brazilian officials and call for "thoughtfulness" and "neutrality." Bolsonaro

has been timid in his reaction to the invasion, and today, many in Latin America perceive that his government endorses Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

Colombia

Gustavo Petro's victory in the June 2022 presidential elections will undoubtedly lead to changes in the foreign policy of Colombia. For the first time, a leader of the left has risen to the pinnacle of political power in this nation, which has long been the most committed US ally in the region. In particular, the new president is expected to restore diplomatic relations with Venezuela,²⁸ which will mean bolstering the legitimacy of the Maduro regime in the international arena and a new challenge to the efforts of democratic governments around the world to promote the return of democracy to the embattled nation.

At the same time, judging by Petro's proposed foreign policy program, the new Colombian president does not intend to radically change the Colombian line regarding relations with the United States. Among the main items on Petro's agenda of relations with the United States²⁹ are the fight against illegal drug trafficking, the rule of law, and the strengthening of democracy. In addition, Colombia and the United States have stable contacts between political, economic, and military institutions that cannot be destroyed overnight. Moreover, according to the data available to the author of this report, the foreign policy advisers of the new president are leading experts in international relations who reject the discourse of Putin's Russia, condemn the war in Ukraine, and understand the nature of the existing regime in Russia. After all, Putin personifies those ideals that Petro constantly rejects, including disrespect for human rights, illegal enrichment of political elites, persecution of political opposition, and the use of military force to achieve foreign policy goals. In this context, it seems likely that despite the change in the ideological vector of the political leadership of Colombia, the increase in Russian influence in Colombia due to Bogotá's left turn will be limited.

The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Russian Modus Operandi in Latin America

Before the war in Ukraine, Russia used various means to advance its strategy in Latin America: foreign trade and economic cooperation, arms trade, limited but timely aid to its key allies, visits by heads of states and other top government officials, Russian diaspora associations affiliated with Russian embassies, and public diplomacy (including cultural and educational exchanges). Regarding various aspects of Russia's multidimensional engagement with Latin America, it is too early to evaluate the medium and long-term impact of the war. However, Russian-Latin American relations will likely experience significant changes in the near future. While new trends will become more visible once Russia and LAC countries adjust their foreign policies accordingly, it is possible to identify the key factors that will shape the future scenario.

The first factor is the drastically reduced capacity of Moscow to offer attractive incentives for foreign trade and economic cooperation for LAC countries because of the unprecedented sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe. The second is limited capacity to provide tangible support combined with political backing in the international arena to Russia's traditional allies since Putin's priority will be addressing economic problems inside Russia while facing growing international isolation. The third factor is the dependence of various Latin American nations on Russian supplies such as armaments and fertilizers. Russia is aware of this and will undoubtedly attempt not to allow this to change. The fourth factor is the degree of the wiliness of Russian political elites to continue to use LAC for reciprocal, albeit primarily symbolic gestures in response to the U.S. policy in Ukraine, Russia's "near abroad." From this perspective, if the conflict in Ukraine intensifies, Putin may attempt to increase Russia's presence in the region. Still, it would have to consider the previous three factors. In this context, the evidence suggests that, for now, Moscow would rely primarily on strategic communication using the established channels that remain readily available and affordable.

For years, strategic communication has been one of the most reliable instruments in achieving Moscow's goals. The Kremlin uses it as a tool of sharp power³⁰ that attempts to increase

the polarization of Latin American societies. As evidenced by the cases of Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, many Latin Americans agree with the Russian narrative that the war in Ukraine is part of an effort to build a new multipolar world order. The idea that their governments must conduct a foreign policy more independent from the position promoted by the United States resonates with the view of many people in the region. Aware of this trend, Russia intensified its strategic communication in LAC after the war in Ukraine had begun. In particular, Russian diplomats actively engage local political figures and public opinion to disseminate the Russian version of the events in Ukraine.

Russia is constantly searching for ways to bypass the limitations imposed by some Western companies, such as YouTube and Twitter. It finds a way to retransmit its programs via newly created accounts in *Telegram*, secondary accounts on YouTube, and traditional channels like *RT en Español* on Facebook, which had more than 18 million followers as of May 2022. The webpage of *RT Actualidad*³¹ is freely available everywhere in LAC. Besides, contrary to the United States and Europe, where authorities have taken measures to limit the exposure of their societies to Russian propaganda, Latin America witnessed the introduction of only limited restrictions imposed mostly by private companies.³² In addition, Russia's diaspora associations affiliated with Russian embassies did not stop their activities. Many Russian diaspora social network groups support the Russian war in Ukraine, publishing news and reports from the Russian government's news agencies. From this perspective, and even though the exact data is unavailable, there is little doubt that Russia still possesses the necessary capabilities to continue exposing Latin Americans to its information coverage.

Opportunities for the United States

The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on Latin America offers new opportunities for the United States. One is to review previous approaches to the countries serving as Russia's gateways to the region. Since Moscow's capacity to provide economic and political support to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela has significantly diminished, they may be willing to adopt new strategies in their bilateral relations with the United States. This is particularly evident in the case of Vene-

zuela, where limited U.S. engagement in the energy sector could become a game-changer and, eventually, reduce other security threats, such as illegal drug trafficking. Besides, the reactivation of the oil sector will likely alleviate the living conditions of ordinary Venezuelans and pave the way for a possible power transition. Similarly, this step would improve U.S. energy security and directly benefit U.S. companies and citizens.

Additionally, if the United States wants Latin America to adopt a more meaningful strategy in terms of economic sanctions, Washington has to consider that LAC governments have been using sanctions as a foreign policy tool mainly in regional scenarios, like the recent crisis in Venezuela, since their direct impact could include refugee flows, economic damage, and the violation of democratic norms established in the Western Hemisphere. On the other hand, recent studies show that Latin American governments are likely to subscribe to an economic sanctions regime if it has the approval of the UNSC, which would be difficult to achieve, given Russia's veto power.³³

In the case of other Latin American nations, it is essential to remember that one of the factors that allowed Russia to advance its Latin American policy is the narrative of building a new world order that could benefit Latin America, combined with the perception held by many Latin Americans that the region is no longer a U.S. priority. In this context, introducing a coordinated U.S.-Latin American communication strategy emphasizing the value of shared U.S.-Latin American interests combined with high-level public events would make it more difficult for Russia to continue exploiting anti-U.S. sentiments. On top of that, broad information coverage of U.S.-Latin American cooperation in cybersecurity, countering transnational organized crime, and offsetting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, for example, would help stress the value of "having Americans as friends" for both elites and wider Latin American societies. After all, the war in Ukraine demonstrated clearly that the Putin regime seeks not to help build a new world order but to carry out an expansionist agenda. That is why an information strategy that would challenge the Russian narrative combined with public diplomacy could significantly improve the image of the United States in the region. Such

a strategy would include seizing opportunities to implement the type of disinformation campaigns regularly conducted by Moscow through government-controlled media outlets and Russian embassies.

Vladimir Rouvinski is Director, Laboratory of Politics and International Relations (PoInt), and Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, at Icesi University in Cali, Colombia. He is a Non-Resident Scholar for the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU.

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RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE SPARKS RANGE OF REACTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

By Andrei Serbin Pont

The initiation of Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine caused a shockwave that left no region in the world untouched as international surprise led to various reactions by national governments of different political and ideological inclinations. As such, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) was no exception. The region has been fertile terrain for Russian diplomatic¹ and military engagement over the last two decades, and several countries have found Russia a credible partner and supplier of a wide range of goods and services. Additionally, the reactions to Russian intervention in Ukraine have not been homogenous, even at national levels.

In the first hours of the invasion, several countries took a strong stance against the Russian military offensive. On February 24, Colombia's President Ivan Duque expressed that Colombia categorically rejected "the premeditated and unjustified attack that has been perpetrated against the Ukrainian people by Russia, which not only undermines its sovereignty but also threatens world peace."

Then-Chilean President-Elect Gabriel Boric said on his Twitter account, "Russia has opted for war as a means of resolving conflicts. From Chile we condemn the invasion of Ukraine, the violation of its sovereignty, and the illegitimate use of force. Our solidarity will be with the victims and our humble efforts with peace."² Foreign Minister Carolina Valdivia said Chile would support the sanctions approved by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)³. Boric's position was of particular relevance. "Anti-imperialism" discourse is deeply rooted in the region, yet the invasion of Ukraine created discomfort for those who do not align with "hard" Bolivarianism, as is the case of Boric's government, representing a departure from the political culture of the "old left."

Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Holguín said that Russian President Vladimir Putin had violated international law, in a similar stance taken by the Foreign Ministry of Peru, which expressed its concern and called for an end to hostilities, while the foreign minister of Paraguay called for dialogue and a ceasefire.

Among the initially contradicting positions was Mexico's government as President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called for dialogue⁴, while his Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard adopted a tougher stance, condemning the invasion and demanding that Russia end its military operations in Ukraine⁵. At the UNSC, Mexico's representative stated that "Mexico will strongly condemn the invasion of which Ukraine has been a victim" and voted in favor of a U.S. resolution condemning the invasion⁶. Ebrard also authored a proposal for the UN General Assembly's Emergency Special Session on Ukraine that included an "immediate cessation of hostilities in Ukraine," and the "establishment of diplomatic space to resolve conflict and the start of humanitarian aid."⁷

A similar case was Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who, a week after his February 2022 meeting with Putin in Moscow, initially made no mention of the Ukraine crisis, coming under heavy criticism from the United States, saying during his visit that he was "in solidarity with Russia."⁸ During a press conference, Bolsonaro stated, "We are not going to take sides. We are going to continue to be neutral and help however possible to find a solution" and highlighted Brazil's ties to Russian oil and fertilizers. In contrast, Brazilian Vice President Hamilton Mourao condemned the military invasion and said that economic sanctions on Russia may not be enough and that the West may need to use force against this country⁹. Mourao also called for a cessation of hostilities and said that as a member of the UNSC, he would act to find a peaceful solution. On February 25, Brazil was one of 11 of the UNSC's 15 members to vote on a U.S.-authored resolution to condemn Russia¹⁰. The Brazilian positions present ambivalences such as those we see in populist movements on a global scale and showcase Putin's ability to resonate with left- or right-leaning authoritarian governments; the shared ideological premise is illiberalism.

Like the case with Brazil, the Argentine foreign ministry sent formal expressions of disapproval of the invasion, and the president has slowly shifted his rhetoric to refer to Russia's actions as an invasion. Yet, Argentina has taken a favorable position to Russian interests in votes held within the Organization of America States (OAS), while it has taken more critical positions in broader multilateral spaces such as the United Nations, particularly in Geneva. In part, this could be attributable to internal disputes within the Argentine government, as well as distinct diplomatic leadership in both organizations.

In the early stages of the war, Cuba did not directly address the invasion, although the Cuban government criticized the United States for imposing "the progressive expansion of NATO toward the borders of the Russian Federation"¹¹ before the offensive. In Venezuela, Foreign Minister Félix Plasencia supported Russia's "fight against what he said was NATO's desire for war," but later, the Venezuelan government made a call "to return to the path of diplomatic understanding" in the face of the crisis.

Overall, the trend in the region has been relatively straightforward, even considering the ongoing contradictions in some countries' positions. This allows us to categorize regional reactions into three groups:

- 1) Those that have consolidated a long-standing partnership with Russia over the past decades (e.g., Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) have expressed support for Putin's actions in Ukraine in multilateral forums and have instrumentalized rhetoric on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention to support Russia in multilateral forums and avoid condemning the invasion.
- 2) Those who have condemned the invasion (e.g., Chile and Colombia), whose positions have been reflected within the framework of multilateral organizations.
- 3) Those who have tried to project neutrality, despite their votes not reflecting it. Many have been willing to take critical positions, although they cautiously select international multilateral instances to express condemnation or support. This is exemplified by Argentina taking a softer stance on Russia at the OAS while leading more robust initiatives at the UN Human Rights Council.

The region's historic positions regarding strong support of national sovereignty and emphasis on non-intervention have been made clear in almost all declarations, even those coming from close partners and allies of Russia. These critical historical and normative elements are difficult to put aside. This is especially the case for governments that have propelled regional policies to reduce foreign intervention, build and consolidate regional integration, and reinforce multilateral mechanisms to strengthen respect for national sovereignty and avoid its violation by foreign powers (mostly portrayed as the threat of U.S. intervention).

As pointed out by Sanahuja, Stefanoni, and Verdes-Montenegro,¹² two crucial factors have consistently influenced recent Latin American positions in a singular regionally-specific way. These countries were still immersed in managing a pandemic and its socioeconomic effects, leading to detachment from mainstream positions in Europe and the United States and the perception of this conflict as "a new war on the 'old continent,' far from its most direct interests." That has an impact more focused on the European order rather than the international system. Yet, as explained by Urzúa Valverde and Pauselli,¹³ Latin American countries value international law because it gives them a clear regulatory framework and restricts the abuses of the most powerful states. Such a weakening of international norms today would mean it would not be that costly for any country to act against them in the future and is therefore consistent with the long-term interests of the LAC countries.

The War's Economic Impact on the Region

In the post-invasion period, Russian activity in the region was not deeply impacted, partly because, as Rodriguez points out,¹⁴ there is a profound Latin American reticence to impose sanctions against Russia. There is a preference for designing collective responses to controversies through multilateral forums that emphasize pacific solutions following international law rather than economic measures enacted without the approval of a multilateral organization. Yet, even if consensus were built around economic sanctions from the region, the impact would be minimal.

Initially, Russian exports to the region were impacted, leading to a fertilizer shortage. Data compiled by Bloomberg's Green Markets shows prices soared so high that farmers halted buying, but now the market has flipped leading to fertilizer supplies piling up in ports¹⁵. Brazil went through great diplomatic efforts to avoid disputes with Russia that could affect its strategic interest in the supply of this much-needed item. Fertilizer exports do not impact Brazil exclusively. Argentina, among other countries, is affected, as this good represents around 40 percent of Russian shipments to the region. Steel is also a relevant export, mainly to Brazil and Mexico, that could have a strategic industrial impact on these economies. Overall, it is important to remember that trade with Russia represents less than 1.5 percent of the total exports of goods from the region.¹⁶

This leaves Russian economic activity relatively unaffected compared to other regions, yet Russia's presence in diplomatic and military spheres is critical. On the diplomatic front, on April 21, 2022, the OAS adopted a resolution suspending Russia as a permanent observer to the intergovernmental institution due to its invasion of Ukraine. With no votes against the resolution, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico abstained, reflecting the aforementioned ambivalences in their country's positions on Russia and their interest in not disrupting a partnership that provides goods crucial to their economies. In the case of Argentina, divisions within the ministry of foreign affairs have also had an impact. While Ambassador Carlos Raimundo represents Argentina in the OAS, close to *Kirchnerismo's* hardliners, in the UN offices in Geneva, Ambassador Federico Villegas is a diplomat with a long legacy of work in the human rights sphere. This helps explain the divergent positions between Argentine votes at the OAS in contrast with its positions at the UN. Also, within the UN, Mexico and Brazil are currently serving two-year terms as non-permanent members of the UNSC, where their career diplomats have criticized Russia.

Overall, the war is leading to uneven and divergent macroeconomic trends in Latin America as global commodity prices are putting pressure on inflation, not only because of the rise in energy prices but also because of the increase in agricultural prices. In the realm of oil exports, countries like Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and

Venezuela may benefit as oil prices rise. Something similar may happen with large agricultural exporters like Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in the short term, and maybe in the medium term, as long as they can overcome reduced access to fertilizers.

A recurring question is on Venezuela's prospects as an alternative to Russia's 7.8 million barrels per day (b/d) of oil. Currently, Venezuela is producing 700,000 to 800,000 b/d, although, at its peak, it was producing more than 3 million b/d. As such, the possibility of easing U.S. sanctions on Venezuela might become an increasingly relevant point of discussion, as well as reshaping expectations of a region that projected significant declines in oil production to comply with the world's goal to limit temperature increases to 1.5 degrees.

Russian Media and Regional Perceptions

Russian media has been proactive in reinforcing Moscow's war rhetoric in LAC and mainstreaming positions favorable to the invasion that portray Ukraine and NATO as the aggressors. This type of messaging has had a positive reception with a diversity of ideological groups, mainly the left-leaning sectors supportive of regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as conservative groups that perceive Putin's agenda as one aligned with their own anti-globalist ideals. As such, Russian war rhetoric continues to be positively perceived by many in the region.

In early March 2022, Synopsis surveyed Argentines' perception of the war in Ukraine and Putin's image.¹⁷ While 63 percent of responses showed Putin having a bad or very bad image, separation by political alignment showed that supporters of the *Frente de Todos* ("Everyone's Front") government coalition and leftist party comprised the largest group of people with a positive impression of Putin. In contrast, 86 percent of *Juntos por el Cambio* (United for Change) voters had a negative view of the Kremlin chief. A PoderData survey conducted in Brazil from February 27 to March 1, 2022, showed that Brazilians have a negative image of Russia.¹⁸ Fifty-six percent expressed a negative impression as opposed to the 6 percent that perceived Putin positively. When breaking down support, 14 percent of Bolsonaro supporters positively perceived Putin.

In a survey conducted by American University

and CRIES (Regional Coordinator of Economic and Social Research) among opinion leaders before the war,¹⁹ Russia's image was already struggling. The survey also showed that more than one-third of opinion leaders considered China's influence negative, while 32 percent found it neutral, and a little more than 25 percent labeled it positive. Compared to other powers, opinion leaders consider China's influence, on average, the second most negative after Russian influence in the region.

Prospects for Russian Cooperation

Before the Ukraine invasion, Russia had strived for a new phase of regional engagement with multiple actors beyond its traditional regional partners. In part, this was reflected by visits from Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez, who expressed interest in Russia's growing role in the region and Argentina's role as a "front door to Latin America."²⁰

For many years, especially at the height of the "pink tide," Venezuela had served as a beachhead for Russian investments and cooperation, leading to a proactive involvement in the country's energy and defense sectors that would later facilitate access to other regional markets. Yet, economic and political conditions in Venezuela have limited Russia's possibilities to increase its presence in the region. This has become increasingly evident with President Joseph R. Biden's administration exploring conditions for reengagement with Venezuela's energy sector.

A recent shift in Maduro's cabinet may serve as an indicator and a message to Russia: former Ambassador to Russia Carlos Faría has been designated Foreign Affairs Minister.²¹ But this was not reciprocated from the Russian side. On May 27, the general director of the Russian Kalashnikov arms consortium, Vladimir Lepin, stated that the factory to produce AK-103 rifles and ammunition in Venezuela would not be launched this year due to logistical problems.²² This comes after years of setbacks from the Venezuelan side but also at a time when the Venezuelan Armed Forces are in critical need of rifles and ammunition to counter a growing criminal insurgency.

The invasion of Ukraine has created an enormous backlash against Russia's diplomatic and military plans in Latin America. Not only have negative perceptions of Russia increased and therefore tarnished the image of Russia as a reliable partner among broad sectors of Latin American society—including in countries with left-leaning governments—prospects for access to Russian credit lines and investments have been rendered unobtainable in the context of global sanctions. Additionally, the poor performance of Russia's military in Ukraine has reinforced the notion among some sectors of the region's armed forces that Russian military hardware is of inferior quality and does not possess adequate manufacturer and logistical support. This perception may condemn some efforts from Russia to position its products, as in the case of the Mig-35 offer to Argentina, losing out to Chinese or U.S. offers.

As such, it is likely that, in the near future, prospects for cooperation in the region, especially in the security and defense spheres, are limited to already consolidated partnerships, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The first has reduced chances of notable cooperation due to Cuba's financial limitations, yet Nicaragua and Venezuela could continue to perceive Russia as one of its most reliable partners. In the case of Venezuela, its already existing dependency on Russian military hardware, training, and technical support in electronic warfare and intelligence means it is unlikely to have a strong shift, at least regarding its military cooperation with Russia. (Note that some segments of Russia's Army Games 2022 will take place in Venezuela). This is especially true as internal stabilization and counterinsurgency operations have become a top priority for Maduro's regime and would require the technical support and know-how it perceives Russia can offer.

Risk of a Latin American Flashpoint

The war in Ukraine started during an already tense moment on the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Since early 2022, the Venezuelan Armed Forces have been conducting a large military deployment in Apure state, bordering Colombia's Arauca, to fight various para-state armed organizations. While no official sources provide quantitative data, open-source investigators have shed light on the magnitude of the deployment. Inoperable until recently, FV101 Scorpi-

ons have been locally refurbished and redeployed to the 91st Armored Cavalry Brigade in Apure. These units then received support from teams across Venezuelan territory, including the deployment of two recently-created Reinforced Infantry Battalions—modeled after Russian Battalion Tactical Groups—along with Naval Commandos, Army Special Forces, Marines, more than 50 pieces of towed artillery, mechanized infantry companies, SAR aircraft, close air support planes, and other systems operated by FANB. Overall, this deployment at times tripled the size of Colombian deployments in the Arauca region.

This deployment not only reflected recent Russian doctrinal influence but also has a critical element of direct Russian support in terms of training military personnel, facilitating drone operations, and providing valuable means and know-how to conduct intelligence operations on the border. This is of particular relevance as U.S. military personnel are on the other side of the Arauca River, which can be tracked via publicly-shared information by government forces and the use of aircraft tracking software that shows C-146A Wolfhound operations and increasingly frequent flights by RC-135W electronic intelligence aircraft over Colombian airspace.

Considering longstanding tensions on the Colombia-Venezuelan border that precede the recent political and ideological differences between the two countries by many decades, and the current lack of communications between Colombian and Venezuelan armed forces in the context of a drastic increase in military operations, the presence of extra-regional powers supporting military operations on both sides introduces a new dimension to regional conflict. As such, and especially in light of growing Russian operations on the Venezuelan side of the border, there is an increased risk that local tension could obtain broader geopolitical relevance. Over time, the Arauca-Apure border or even the general Colombia-Venezuela border could become a flashpoint for U.S.-Russia geopolitical dispute. This scenario could be further exacerbated by a consolidated Chinese presence in Venezuela and rapidly-growing technical and operational cooperation by the Venezuelan Armed Forces with Iran.

Opportunities

Russia's presence in Latin America will continue to have limitations. The main opportunity for the United States to engage with the region is to "fill the gaps" left by Russia's shortcomings. As such, facilitating access to investments in the energy sector and other critical industries, such as agriculture (including access to alternative sources for necessary material and equipment), can contribute to the long-term neutralization of Russian strategic engagement.

More importantly, the war in Ukraine is undermining the perception of Russia as a reliable military hardware provider. This opportunity is not exclusive to the United States but also to other military suppliers, including China. Tenders for combat aircraft, helicopters, air defense systems, and other platforms have weakened Russian offers, while China has already proven itself agile enough to seize such opportunities, as exemplified by Venezuelan contracts for equipping its Marine Infantry Forces and the Venezuelan Air Force. Still, the United States is perceived as an overall reliable provider of military hardware, including post-sales support for weapons systems. As such, a combination of facilitated access to surplus military hardware and participation in relevant tenders with soft credits (as well as industrial offsets in cases such as Argentina and Brazil) can provide the United States with a competitive edge over other prospective providers in the region.

Andrei Serbin Pont is an International analyst focused on foreign policy, defense, security, human rights, regional integration, conflict and mass atrocity prevention. He is the Executive Director of the regional think tank CRIES (Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales). He also is a Non-Resident Scholar for the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DAVID J. KRAMER

David J. Kramer is the Bradford M. Freeman Managing Director of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the George W. Bush administration. He also is a Senior Fellow in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at FIU.



VLADIMIR ROUVINSKI

Vladimir Rouvinski is Director, Laboratory of Politics and International Relations (PoInt), and Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, at Icesi University in Cali, Colombia. He is a Non-Resident Scholar for the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU.



ANDREI SERBIN PONT

Andrei Serbin Pont is an International analyst focused on foreign policy, defense, security, human rights, regional integration, conflict and mass atrocity prevention. He is the Executive Director of the regional think tank CRIES (Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales). He also is a Non-Resident Scholar for the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy.

