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The Misleading Truths of Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America

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“[Russia needs] a channel that people are used to; one they like and [that can be ready to expose its audience to the required information feed]. In a sense, not having your own foreign broadcasting is like not having a ministry of defense. When there is no war, it seems like [media in foreign languages] is not needed. But [...] when there is war, this is directly critical. But you can't create an army a week before the war has begun.”

Margarita Simonyan (RT editor-in-chief), “Russian media from inside,” Afisha Daily, October 18, 2011

Russia's return to the Western Hemisphere

During the Cold War, Latin America and the Caribbean served as a stage for power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The logic of a bipolar world guided the policy design of Washington and Moscow. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, new Russia lost its interest in the region. Facing enormous economic difficulties, the government of Boris Yeltsin collaborated with the United States on various international agenda topics. Yet, at the beginning of the new century, under the government of Vladimir Putin, Russia returned to the Western Hemisphere. While there are several reasons behind Russia's return, the notion of reciprocity is the foremost factor.

The majority of the elites that govern Russia today view the entire Western Hemisphere as Washington's priority area of political, economic, and social concern. Similarly, the top officials of Putin's government consider the territory of the former Soviet Union, a “near abroad,” as the most important geographical area outside Russia's borders. Russian leadership is convinced that Moscow has the right to have special interests in this “near abroad” because of historical, cultural, and economic ties. Hence, post-Soviet Russian leaders insist that all governments outside the region must consider Russia's special interests before advancing their relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Symbolic reciprocity has multiple manifestations in the realm of Russian foreign policy. First, it is an opportunity for Putin's government to show that Russia can respond reciprocally to what is perceived by the Russian elites as destructive actions by the U.S. government in Moscow's “near abroad.” For example, during the crisis in Georgia in 2008, the Russian government expressed its concerns regarding the U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea and the support Washington offered to anti-Russian forces.¹ Moscow sent its strategic bombers and naval ships to the Western Hemisphere right after the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

Moreover, the signs of increased military cooperation with Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba coincided with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and U.S. support of Kyiv.² The active participation of Moscow in Venezuela's latest crisis is yet another manifestation of the symbolic reciprocity approach in Latin America. At the same time—and since Russia has limited conventional resources—it resorts more frequently to asymmetrical methods than traditional engagement to pursue a policy of reciprocity. Strategic communication is one of the tools of that policy.

The modus operandi of Russia's strategic communication

In today's globalized world, states use strategic communication to enhance their capabilities abroad and facilitate foreign policy objectives via long-established activities, including public diplomacy, public affairs, nation branding, and information operations. After Putin came to power, Moscow opted not simply to broaden the scope of its communication overseas but to exercise “sharp power” through solid mechanisms that could effectively disseminate desired values, interests, and goals. Coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig,³ sharp power describes efforts that seek to pierce, penetrate, and perforate the political and information environments of targeted countries. In this context, Russian strategic communication in Latin America is Moscow's principal vehicle of sharp power. It enables the Putin government to cut into the fabric of Latin American society, amplifying existing political divisions, questioning liberal democratic order, and diminishing U.S. influence in the region.

Although contemporary global communication may use various channels to reach targeted audiences, Russia's modus operandi in Latin America relies heavily on government-controlled mass media, namely, RT television networks and the Sputnik news agency in Spanish. As part of Putin's foreign strategy, Russian foreign-language broadcasting targets viewers in Latin America because Moscow presumes it is easier to attract new audiences there than compete with established media outlets in the United States and Western Europe. As globalization and economic liberalization increased cultural exchanges in the southern part of the Western Hemisphere in the 1990s and 2000s, Latin Americans requested broader coverage of political and international topics than the mainstream local media offered. Nevertheless, the offer remained limited.⁴ Hence, from the Russian perspective, media markets would respond favorably to new international broadcasters in Spanish if the new outlets would provide a different perspective on critical subjects of public interest. Although RT started in 2005 by broadcasting in English to viewers

in English-speaking Western countries, it later turned a considerable share of its attention to Latin America. The success of Russian efforts to reach a wider audience is evident by the number of RT's followers on the internet, affiliated TV cable providers, and geographical scope.

In 2021, only 12 years after its first Spanish-language broadcast, RT is readily available everywhere in the region. In some cases, the channel is made available as part of public TV broadcasting systems (Argentina, Venezuela, and Cuba) or as part of the state satellite system (Bolivia). In other countries, such as Colombia, hundreds of small local cable networks retransmit RT programming in addition to Claro, the principal cable provider in the country. Moreover, RT pays cable operators to carry its signal on allied networks, making it difficult to end collaboration with Moscow; in many cases, Russian funding helps smaller operators survive in the market. RT also has agreements to broadcast programs on local channels; viewers are often unaware the information they receive comes from Russia. This approach allows RT to extend the reach of Russia's strategic communication to potentially millions of additional viewers in Latin America. Besides, RT is freely available 24 hours per day and online. As a result, in September 2021, RT in Spanish on Facebook⁵ had more than 18 million followers. The RT YouTube channel in Spanish had over five million subscribers,⁶ and RT Play in Spanish on Facebook had more than six million.⁷ Finally, more than 3.5 million people follow RT in Spanish's Twitter account.

However, the analysis of the presence of Russia's government-sponsored media would be incomplete without mentioning the Sputnik news agency. This media outlet maintains its own websites in addition to traditional and digital radio broadcasting in three-dozen languages, but it is part of the same organizational framework as RT. Sputnik's Spanish-language branch is Sputnik Mundo.⁸

Despite the diversity of programs and media platforms, a close examination of the content produced by RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo reveals several standard features. First, there is the inclusion of politically unrelated news and reports like sensationalized bulletins in its feeds. This strategy aims to recruit new followers who otherwise might not be interested in getting information from RT or Sputnik. It also provides Russia with the potential to use a CNN-like effect understood as real-time communication to provoke the desired response from foreign audiences. Second, the main political narratives employed by Russian media for foreign audiences support the official position of the Russian government. It is not to say that RT and Sputnik focus exclusively on Russia's foreign policy agenda. Yet, it is a clear priority of its information coverage. Third, RT's global "information menu" is designed to take advantage of opportuni-

ties unique to each region. In Latin America, many of RT's politically sensitive programs align with narratives promoted by political forces to the left of the political spectrum. However, some other programs, which have millions of views, often are anchored by celebrities associated with political forces other than the Latin American left. For instance, during the 2018 World Cup in Russia, RT hired Carlos Valderrama, one of South America's most recognizable soccer players. Regarding Colombian politics, Valderrama supported the right-centrist U party of then-Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos. With Latin American societies becoming ideologically more polarized, RT's potential looks promising for Moscow. By using its media outlets, Russia can reach out to various segments of the population and skillfully apply sharp power by questioning established facts related to sensitive topics for some viewers. This approach is particularly noticeable when it comes to the coverage of U.S.-related developments.

RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo's narratives

While the narratives delivered through RT and other news agencies emphasized the role of Russia as a global player, they also stressed that the United States resisted the process of Russia regaining its influence in the international arena and opposed building a new multipolar order with Latin American partners. Moscow is seeking to misinform viewers regarding U.S. policy on other topics, including migration, liberal democracy, and economic and social issues. In recent years, two items have been foremost on that agenda: the crisis in Venezuela and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most important Venezuela-related narrative fits perfectly with the logic of symbolic reciprocity: "The United States wants regime change." Russian media interprets the opposition struggle as Washington's attempt to change the unfriendly regime in Caracas, identical to the "color revolutions" in Russia's "near abroad." According to Russian government-controlled media, these efforts bring about the deterioration of living standards, the suffering of ordinary people, and widespread violence. Furthermore, as part of Russia's strategic communication agenda, RT is mobilized to provide information backing Nicolás Maduro's regime while justifying Moscow's aid to Caracas as a necessary move to protect the world "against malign U.S. intentions." RT aimed to discredit Juan Guaidó and cast doubts on his legitimacy and capacity to govern. Since the beginning of the latest crisis in Venezuela in January 2019, the channel has aired more than 300 reports with Guaidó's name in the headlines of its newsfeed. Another story line is dedicated to the impact of U.S. sanctions. RT tried to convince its viewers that the main reason behind Venezuela's catastrophic situation was not the disastrous economic

policy of the Chavista government but, rather, U.S. sanctions. In this context, RT dedicated numerous reports to praising the efforts of Maduro's government to govern the country with timely assistance offered by Moscow.

The COVID-19-related strategic communication originating in Russia and destined for Latin America took full advantage of the introduction of the "Sputnik-V" vaccine and the beginning of the "COVID vaccine race." First, the news of the Sputnik-V vaccine was interpreted as evidence of Russia being one of the most technologically advanced nations, which is often denied because of bad publicity originated in the Western media. In addition, RT and Sputnik Mundo alleged that pro-U.S. Latin American governments were unwilling to acquire the Russian vaccine—not because it does not comply with the necessary protocols and tests, but because of their political ties with Washington. This type of strategy has created several noticeable tensions in the Latin American information space. In December 2020, for example, RT's Inna Afinogenova skillfully engaged the popular Colombian newsmaker Vicky Davila in a public debate about the role of Russian media in Latin America when reporting on sensitive topics like COVID-19. The debate attracted the attention of many viewers who otherwise would be unaware of RT in Spanish. In 2021, Russia signed agreements to start producing the Sputnik vaccine in Argentina and negotiating the delivery of Russian vaccines to other Latin American countries. Therefore, there is little doubt that Moscow will continue to exploit politically sensitive topics such as the COVID-19 vaccine.

Beyond disseminating Moscow's overarching narratives in Latin America

By 2021, RT and other Russian government-sponsored media had become a familiar source of information in the Spanish-speaking world of the Americas. The Kremlin managed to restore the possibility of being exposed to an alternative view to the one promoted by the United States and democratic governments in the region for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet propaganda machine. Contemporary Russian information coverage is once again an aggressive, purposeful intervention in the international media space that goes beyond the dissemination of Moscow's overarching narratives.

One of the factors behind RT's success in Latin America is the public's lack of understanding of the nature of Moscow's interest in the region's information space. Many Latin Americans perceive the growing incidence of Russian media as something "normal," part of the exercise of freedom of expression and diversity of opinions. However, it is part of a foreign policy strategy designed to achieve specific objectives by the Putin government.

Russia thrives on communicating desired explanations for important developments with comfortable ease and makes it difficult for democratic governments to repair the damage. The sharing of democratic values among the countries of the Western Hemisphere is the key to security in the region; the prevalence of like-minded democracies makes the political geography of the Western Hemisphere unique. Since Russia is not a democracy, RT and Sputnik Mundo often refer to democracy as a political regime with many weaknesses. In this context, one of the long-term goals of Russia in Latin America is to carry out continuous strategic communication via government-controlled outlets to undermine the idea of democratic order.

The advance of Russia's strategic communication in Latin America has almost no opposition. There have been only a few public debates on RT and Sputnik in the regional information space. Therefore, it is necessary to continue raising the awareness of decision-makers and the Latin American public regarding the nature of Russia's government-controlled mass media. At the same time, it is vital to challenge Russia's strategic communication by escalating government-led efforts. While the United States promotes its political culture by supporting democratic movements and local mass media in Latin America, U.S. media consists of predominantly commercial outlets. The mainstream media in English is the first choice of highly educated Latin Americans, a minority in the region. CNN en Español (2.5 million subscribers on YouTube, many based in the United States), CNN Chile (0.5 million subscribers), CNN Radio Argentina, and several others have established impressive audiences. Still, their further growth depends on market factors. Currently, U.S. government-sponsored information outlets have limited reach in the region. For instance, as of September 2021, Voice of America in Spanish has only 180,000 subscribers on YouTube compared to the millions of followers of RT and Sputnik. From this perspective, Russia's strategic communications have a broader reach to those segments of Latin American societies that—in the context of growing economic and social difficulties in the region—might be willing to endorse views originating in Moscow.

Despite some similarities, overall, it is difficult to consider the current confrontation of Putin with the West as a new cold war. Post-Soviet Russia neither military nor economically matches the USSR, and the Kremlin's objectives are different from those promoted by Soviet leadership. Nevertheless, many Russian decision-makers consider that Russia is at war—not a "hot war," but a new kind of confrontation characterized by a comparable level of symbolic tension with the United States and its allies as during the Cold War. Moreover, elites

in Moscow are convinced there is little hope the pressure will ease anytime soon. In this context, Russia will attempt to sustain and expand its strategic communication in Latin America via RT in Spanish, Sputnik Mundo, and other media outlets as a cost-effective tool of its foreign policy.

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⁷RT Play en Español Facebook webpage, www.facebook.com/esRTmedia/.

⁸Sputnik Mundo webpage, mundo.sputniknews.com/.

⁹For example, the most popular videos published by RT on YouTube are not politically related. See the list of the videos available at RT en Español's YouTube webpage: www.youtube.com/c/RTenEspa%C3%B1ol/videos?view=0&sort=p&flow=grid, accessed September 14, 2021. See also Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw, "Weaponising News RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation," King's College London Centre for the Study of Media, Communication & Power, 2019, www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/weaponising-news.pdf, accessed September 14, 2021.

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