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The Russian Media in Latin America

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Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author or authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Latin American and Caribbean Center or Florida International University.

Latin America is generally regarded as being “open for business,” as it is actively approaching extra-hemispheric powers and regions in order to develop stronger diplomatic and economic ties, and even security-related initiatives. One goal, boasted by some leaders more strongly than others, is to reduce Washington’s historical influence in the region. (In a November 2013 speech at the Organization of American States, Secretary of State John Kerry declared that the “Monroe Doctrine” was over, but whether this is truly occurring or not is open to debate.)ⁱ

Apart from summits between Latin American and extra-hemispheric powers like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) or IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) or trade-related initiatives (Peru is currently negotiating a free trade agreement with India), there is a growth of media-related projects throughout Latin America funded and managed by extra-hemispheric states.ⁱⁱ Without a doubt, the rise of the Internet and affordability of Internet and TV access has prompted the globalization of both information and opinions.

Russia and Latin America

It is in this scenario that we find ourselves questioning Russia’s message towards Latin America. Certainly, Russia’s numerous and particularly recent diplomatic initiatives towards the region have been well recorded and analyzed. In 2014, President Vladimir Putin traveled to Fortaleza, Brazil, to attend a BRICS summit, after which he toured the region and visited Argentina, Nicaragua and Cuba.ⁱⁱⁱ Most recently, in January, Valentina Matvienko, the President of the Russian Senate, visited Nicaragua.^{iv} Moreover, in late-March, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov also carried out his own tour of the region, visiting Cuba, Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua.^v In other words, it has become standard practice for high-level Russian government officials to visit Latin American states.

Growing ties between Moscow and the western hemisphere are also exemplified via trade. In particular, Russia has stepped up its purchases of beef, poultry and other types of meat from Brazil and Argentina. The reason for this stems from the Ukraine crisis. As a result of Russia's military support for Eastern separatists in Ukraine, the U.S. and many of its Western allies placed economic sanctions on Russia. In retaliation, the Russian government decided to implement a food embargo against Washington, most of Europe and other U.S. allies, like Australia.^{vi} This means that Russia no longer imports meat products from Europe, hence it has to purchase them from someplace else (i.e. willing suppliers like Argentina and Brazil).^{vii}

Weapons sales have garnered the most attention from international media over the past decade, particularly as the Venezuelan government spends billions of dollars upgrading its armed forces with Russian military equipment.^{viii} However, Russia has diversified its weapons sales across the region. For example, Brazil has purchased Russian air defense systems to protect the skies of Rio de Janeiro during the 2016 Summer Olympics, and Peru has acquired Mi-helicopters for internal security operations.^{ix} More Russian weapons deals with Latin America may be on the table, as Moscow has been trying to sell tanks to Lima for some time (to replace its Soviet-era fleet), though without much success.^x

Russia's use of media outlets can be regarded as an example of "soft power" initiatives designed to increase the Russian government's point of view across Latin America. This is comparable to the U.S. doing the same throughout Warsaw Pact states via Voice of America during the Cold War. The following sections of this paper will discuss in greater detail what kind of opinions and arguments the Russian media presents to Latin America, and how they are received.

What is Russia's message in Latin America?

There have been countless speeches by President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other high-ranking Russian officials regarding their view of what the world order should be. However a February 4, 2015 press release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarizes Moscow's message (though maybe not all of its intentions, depending on one's point of view). The press release was published after the January 2015 Third Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), an organization that excludes the U.S. and Canada.

Alexander Lukashevich, representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues:

We note with satisfaction that CELAC is being established amid the general consolidation of LAC [Latin America & the Caribbean] as a new center in the emerging multipolar world order that allows Latin American countries to develop and promote joint approaches to global issues. We are supportive of the integration processes in the region that seek to achieve this goal. LAC's approaches to a variety of issues on the international agenda, which are included in the summit's documents (Final Declaration and the Action Plan for 2015), are in line with Russia's.^{xi}

This is a good summary of Russia's public message to Latin American governments and populations alike: it supports multi-polarity and seeks an end to the U.S.-led unipolar world order. Russia both encourages and supports the integration of various regions to promote peace.

Moreover, as President Putin notes (and will be discussed further in a later section), the Russian government wishes to use its media outlets to provide nations across the world with a different global perspective than Washington or Europe. These opinions typically critique the U.S. and its allies' involvement around the world. For example, an article published April 10,

2015 by *Russia Today en Español* is a transcript, with some analysis, of an interview with a U.S. analyst, William Engdahl. The article's title has the catchy and controversial quote "El objetivo de EE.UU. es destruir a Rusia como Estado" ("The objective of the U.S. is to destroy Russia as a state").^{xii} Unsurprisingly, a major goal of Russia's media services is to discredit U.S. foreign policy initiatives and make Washington appear belligerent and resorting to imperialistic measures.

It is worth noting that the Russian government has good relations with several Latin American countries, particularly those of the ALBA bloc including Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua, as well as fellow-BRICS nations, Brazil and Argentina (which is at odds with the U.S. over the vulture funds and continuous U.S. support related to the Falkland Islands). Hence, Russian media programs in Latin America are not so much aimed at governments, as many are already sympathetic towards Moscow (or at least they do not behave as enemies). Rather, the Spanish-language versions of Russian media outlets work to maintain distrust in segments of the Latin American population that regard the U.S. as an imperialistic power.

How does Russia leverage media to propagate its message?

Russian is a very different language to Spanish. Whereas a Spanish speaker may be able to comprehend some Portuguese because of its linguistic similarities, a Latin American who does not speak Russian would be unable to understand it. Hence, Russia's media outlets have recently expanded in the region by establishing several news services that are translated into Spanish.

As a personal disclaimer, I have been interviewed numerous times for Russian media outlets, both in English and Spanish, including some of the ones discussed below.

Russia Today (RT) is a Russian channel that has become the flagship of Moscow's media projects to the rest of the world. Today we find RT articles in various languages, including Spanish but interestingly not in Portuguese (at least not yet). Russia Today en Español (also known as Actualidad RT (<http://actualidad.rt.com/>)) has bureaus in Washington DC as well as in Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Venezuela. For example, I have been interviewed by RT in their Washington DC studio, the sets there are used for English and Spanish publications (and possibly other languages).

Russia Today is also transmitted throughout Latin America as part of different cable TV or satellite packages. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

As for other news outlets, Sputnik News, Russia's newest media outlet, already has a Spanish version called Sputnik Mundo (<http://mundo.sputniknews.com/>). Moreover, the older and well-known Russian media service, Pravda, also has a Spanish service (<http://pravdainternacional.blogspot.com/>) in addition to other news sites like Russia Beyond the Headlines (<http://es.rbth.com/>)

Finally, we should mention the Voice of Russia (VoR), the Russian government's radio and online broadcasting service which operated from 1993 until 2014, when it was replaced by Sputnik News. The VoR served as a way for Moscow to compete against Washington's Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. It was transmitted in numerous languages, including Spanish.

How does Russia's message resonate with the Latin American audience?

Trying to determine how effective Russia's media outlets have been throughout Latin America is obviously difficult. I have not been able to find any statistical reports regarding how widespread Russia Today en Español is in any Latin American country. Looking at user comments and articles about Russia's media outlets in the region captures a very small part of a wide spectrum, but it can give us an idea of how such initiatives are received.

Russia Today's presence in Argentina can serve as a good mini case-study. The channel first started airing in 2014. An October 2014 article published on the website Russia Beyond the Headlines has the positive headline: "La buena sintonía entre Argentina y Rusia se plasma en los medios de comunicación," which translates to "The good relations between Russia and Argentina are exemplified via media outlets."^{xiii} The article goes on to praise bilateral relations and discusses how adding the Russian TV channel to the roster of channels available to Argentinians will "multiply the option for opinions," allowing for TV viewers to reach their own conclusions on different issues. Even more, Argentine President Kirchner and President Putin held a videoconference that was transmitted live via RT en Español to celebrate the transmission deal. During the speech, Kirchner explained that RT will benefit both Russia and Argentina, as "when nations know each other better [...] this reduces the possibility of conflict." Meanwhile President Putin discussed "the information wars [are] international actors try[ing] to monopolize the truth."^{xiv}

Here is where things get fun. Russia Beyond the Headlines is naturally supportive of RT en Español now being offered in Argentina. However, some non-Russian media outlets were more critical of this development. For example the Latin American news website Taringa! has a brief three-paragraph report regarding RT, but it also features a photoshopped photo of President

Putin with half his face appearing as a Terminator.^{xv} Additionally, Taringa! reported a bizarre development. In 2012, Russia Today aired an analysis of the Kirchner administrations (both the late President Nestor and his wife, current President, Cristina) on its *Detras de las Sombras* program called “La Patagonia en Oferta,” (“Patagonia on Sale”). However, after President Kirchner and President Putin agreed to have Russia Today en Español air in Argentina, this documentary was removed from RT’s website.^{xvi} (For the record, while RT’s website does not have this episode, it is available in YouTube via other users.)^{xvii}

As for the general audience, as previously mentioned, it is difficult to assess how much of an impact RT en Español, Sputnik Mundo, or the late Voice of Russia for that matter have, as studies about such impact (in English, Spanish or Portuguese) could not be found. Looking at the comment sections and retweets is not a scientific way to understand RT en Español’s impact, but it does provide us with a general idea of the situation. For example, Sputnik Mundo published a report on April 12, 2015 about U.S. plans to create a “digital army” designed to publish information through social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, as well as VKontakte & Odnoklassniki (two popular social media platforms in Russia), in order to combat Russian “disinformation.”^{xviii} The article has 12 “likes” on Facebook at the time of this writing and has also been shared four times on Sputnik Mundo’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/sputnik.mundo>). Additionally, four Facebook users have left comments on said article, with one saying, in Spanish: “who misinforms and manipulates more than the U.S.?”

When it comes to RT en Español, one good example can be found in the article, “Político ruso: ‘EE.UU. necesita las sanciones para seguir con su impune vandalismo económico’” (“Russian Politician: ‘U.S. Needs Sanctions to Continue its Economic Vandalism’”), published on

April 14, 2015.^{xix} The article is an account by Serguéi Naryshkin, president of the Russian State Duma, accusing the U.S. of trying to control the European economy and other economies around the world either via sanctions (like against Russia) or trade pacts. Unlike Sputnik Mundo, RT en Español does allow for users to post comments on RT's website. The aforementioned article currently has some 13 comments. While some of them are critical of the article, most of them support Naryshkin's statements. One user posted that the U.S. economy is going to end up like Somalia's, while another said that "for every action that the Europeans want to carry out, they have to ask their master [Washington] for approval."

Finally, another user argues that the sanctions have not affected Russia at all as the ruble is strong, and now "the whole world is running to the Asian Development Bank [meanwhile] the BRICS countries are the future and the [US] dollar will disappear." This comment is particularly interesting as there have been several reports of the past months about how the sanctions have affected Russia as its economy has contracted.^{xx} Then again, the reports that discuss this were published in English in U.S. media organizations like PBS and ABC news; which understandably affects how much of an effect they will have on a Latin American audience who may or may not speak English (or may or may not believe them). This is another example, as previously mentioned, of the Russian media focusing on promoting a number of "bullet point" ideas to its Latin American followers regarding U.S. foreign policy activities.

Furthermore, it is worth adding that Russian media in Spanish has been successful at making a splash when it comes to reporting on Latin American issues that do not solely focus on the Washington-Moscow rivalry. Case in point, on September 24, 2014 RT published an article entitled: "Rusia venderá a Perú 140 tanques T-90C" ("Russia will sell 140 T-90C tanks to Peru").^{xxi} If RT's website is to be believed, the article has been "liked" some 10 thousand times,

shared over 580 times via Twitter and has generated 684 comments on RT's webpage. The comments seem to be from legitimate users that discuss whether Peru needs these tanks, touching on Peru's historical tensions with its southern neighbor, Chile.

As a final issue, there is the possibility that some of the users "liking" and posting comments in support of Sputnik Mundo or RT en Español articles could be Russian users. After all, if Hollywood celebrities can hire companies to increase their followers on Twitter, it is valid to argue that some of the support Russian media outlets are receiving could be coming from within Russia itself.^{xxii} While not an expert in linguistics, I have reviewed the comments left on Sputnik's Facebook page and on different RT en Español articles, and their way of expressing themselves does make them sound like native Spanish-speakers, not foreigners speaking Spanish. (Nevertheless, reviewing user comments is certainly advisable.)

What are the challenges and opportunities for Russian strategic communication in Latin America?

One obvious challenge of Russia's media strategy towards Latin America is that, simply put, it is one voice among many.

Let us look at the situation another way. Most Latin American TV channels have their own domestic news programs, usually an hour at night with shorter news updates throughout the day. If a person has cable or satellite TV, they have access to even more news channels, like the well-established CNN en Español or BBC Mundo. However, other governments also have their own news channels that they are exporting to the rest of the world in order to promote their own points of view (one can easily reference here Joseph Nye's analysis on the uses and effectiveness of "soft power").

Other notable foreign-run Spanish news outlets include Iran's HispanTV (<http://www.hispantv.com/>) while the German news site DW also has a Spanish-version website (<http://www.dw.de/actualidad/s-30684>). Additionally, it would be surprising if Al Jazeera chose not to begin a Spanish TV service in the near future. Even more, there are regional Latin American channels that have news programs, such as Univision (<http://www.univision.com/>) and Telemundo (<http://www.telemundo.com/>). Finally, there is now one 24/7 regional news channel: TeleSur (<http://www.telesurtv.net/>), which started in 2005 in Venezuela and now has an English-language service (<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/>).

In other words, while the rise of Russia Today en Español is an important development, there are plenty of other news outlets that Latinos can turn to watch the latest news.

Moreover, there is the question of how accessible RT en Español is throughout Latin America. The channel is making a name for itself, but finding the channel itself is not necessarily easy. The RT en Español webpage in Wikipedia mentions the cable and satellite mediums via which Latin Americans can watch the channel in TV. For example, when it comes to Peru, RT en Español is transmitted via two cable services: Cablemas (Channel 102) and Cable Vision (Channel 115). But these are only two options, and there is a veritable plethora of cable services in Peru nowadays. A June 2014 article in the Peruvian daily *El Comercio* explains how there are some 470 cable suppliers in Peru, many of which use illegal techniques to supply cable to its users, particularly those outside Lima.^{xxiii} In other words, figuring out how many Peruvians have RT en Español via their legal or illegal cable package is quite difficult to estimate.

Unsurprisingly, it is online where Russian media outlets like Russia Today en Español or Sputnik Mundo have the biggest opportunity for growth. These services have already created

apps that users can download for free on their smartphones; the caveat being that they are only available in English, not in Spanish or Portuguese. If a translation service can be created, it would obviously help spread Russian opinions on global affairs.

A final point must be noted about whether Russian programs, in Russia, have or will have a niche in Latin America. After all, thanks to the Internet, most TV channels have uploaded at least a significant portion of their programs online in an effort to increase viewership. Moreover, while Russian is not a language that is vastly popular in Latin America, there are people who do speak it. This is partially due to educational initiatives dating back to the Soviet Union that provided scholarships for Latin American students to attend Russian (or then Soviet) universities. Such initiatives continue to this day, and there are even reports of Russian being taught at certain educational centers in Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela.^{xxiv} It would not be surprising that some Latin American Russian-speakers also follow Russian media outlets online. While that number may be miniscule (particularly those that follow Russian media in Spanish or follow media outlets in English or even Spanish), this is an important consideration to bear in mind.

ⁱ “Remarks on U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere.” Speech by John Kerry at the Organization of American States. November 18, 2013. Transcript by the U.S. State Department.

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217680.htm>

ⁱⁱ “India pidió al Perú iniciar diálogo formal para un TLC.” El Comercio. January 30, 2015.

<http://elcomercio.pe/economia/peru/india-pidio-al-peru-inciar-dialogo-formal-firmar-tlc-noticia-1788328>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Putin’s L.America ‘big tour,’ deals done.” Russia Today. July 17, 2014. <http://rt.com/business/173520-putin-latin-america-deals/>

^{iv} “El Gran canal de la Amistad entre Rusia y Nicaragua.” Sputnik Mundo. Prensa. January 15, 2015.

<http://mundo.sputniknews.com/prensa/20150115/1033260943.html>

^v “Russian foreign minister continues Latin America tour.” Telesur. March 25, 2015.

<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Russian-Foreign-Minister-Continues-Latin-America-Tour-20150325-0012.html>

^{vi} Isabel Gorst and Christi Parsons. “Russia begins implementing food embargo against U.S. and allies.” LA Times. August 7, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-import-ban-takes-shape-20140807-story.html>

^{vii} “Russia’s import ban means big business for Latin America.” Russia Today. August 7, 2014.

<http://rt.com/business/178664-latin-america-benefits-russia-ban/>

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- x “Rusia vendera a Peru 140 tanques T-90C.” Russia Today. September 20, 2014. http://actualidad.rt.com/ultima_hora/view/140835-rusia-venta-peru-tanques
- xi “Comment by official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexander Lukashevich on the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.” Press Release. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. February 4, 2015. http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/a4622703866b22d843257de4002793c0!OpenDocument
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