

10-2021

Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean

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“¿SEPA MÁS?”

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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OCTOBER 2021

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Jeffery Tobin and Rhonda Shore for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After Vladimir Putin's Russia returned to Latin America and the Caribbean, strategic communication became a key engagement tool, enabling Moscow to apply sharp power in the region successfully. As a result, during the last decade, Moscow created mechanisms that effectively communicate values, interests, and narratives to facilitate Russia's foreign policy objectives in the Western Hemisphere. This research traces the advance of Russian information strategy in the Latin American information space during the last decades and shows:

- A high degree of institutionalization of Russian strategic communication, particularly of the RT TV channel and Sputnik News Network as primary tools of Russia's communication abroad.
- RT acquired a noticeable share of international media space in Latin America in terms of budget, workforce, digital platforms, and audience reach.
- Specific characteristics of Russia's return to Latin America and the Caribbean, including the notion of symbolic reciprocity, which shapes the political context in which strategic communication occurs.
- The main narratives employed by RT and other Russian government-controlled media outlets in the region. The story lines of the Venezuelan crisis and COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the approaches adapted by Russia to disseminate information to Latin American audiences.

The report confirms that RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo are the primary vehicles of Russian information strategy among the Spanish-speaking population in the Western Hemisphere. Today, they are a familiar source of information for millions of Latin Americans exposed to an alternative view to the one promoted by the United States and other democratic governments. In addition, Russia's strategic communication via RT and Sputnik Mundo casts doubts about the United States and its regional allies' policies regarding critical regional and international topics. Furthermore, the media controlled by the Russian government attacks the values of liberal democracy and portrays authoritarian

regimes as more suitable for solving contemporary societal problems. Finally, although RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo may still have fewer viewers than the mainstream media in Latin America, they are gaining new followers. They can extend their reach in the future. To mitigate Russia's efforts, it is necessary to:

- Raise the awareness of decision-makers and the Latin American public regarding the nature of Russia's government-controlled mass media.
- Escalate U.S. and other democratic government-led strategic communication efforts in the region via media outlets broadcasting in Spanish.
- Conduct specialized surveys that would help to better identify the impact of Russian media on Latin American public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

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 many international agenda topics. Yet at the beginning of 2000, under the government of Vladimir Putin, Russia returned to the Western Hemisphere, and it is possible to point out some features of its continuous presence in the region since then. The use of strategic communication as a tool of engagement is one.

In today's constantly changing international environment, in addition to the use of hard power, many countries explore new approaches to reach their foreign policy objectives. These are often referred to as "hybrid warfare," which includes "information warfare."¹ While the phenomenon lacks a commonly accepted definition, it is associated with scenarios in which actors use nonmilitary means to achieve political goals by the states, including economy and trade, international development cooperation, information, and humanitarian assistance.

At the same time, not all states possess equal capacities to conduct a full range of activities in all areas of engagement. Therefore, they often choose to concentrate on what is affordable and most effective. Moreover, in various scenarios, the states complement traditional approaches with a “hybrid warfare” toolkit. Non-traditional instruments offer greater flexibility and deniability, allowing governments to revise their strategies and quickly adjust existing narratives to new demands. Recent studies reveal that non-traditional approaches in Russia became necessary for reaching specific foreign policy aims that otherwise would be difficult to achieve.²

This report uses the strategic communication framework to examine Russia’s information policy in the Western Hemisphere. Global strategic communication is part of diverse and heterogeneous activities by many actors, including states, transnational corporations, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This study focuses on strategic communications by states as “a mode of thought and practices promising to enhance state capabilities encompassing long-established activities, including public diplomacy, public relations, nation branding, and information operations.”³ From this perspective, it is important to differentiate strategic communication and soft power. After Joseph Nye coined the soft power concept in the late 1980s, it became widely used to characterize many international developments. Soft power refers to the capacity of nations to take advantage of the attractiveness of their political models and cultural or technological achievements to influence people living in other countries. The use of soft power can bring the desired results to states through attraction rather than coercion or financial commitment.⁴

However, in Russia’s case, there are many limits to exercising soft power. In the first years after the end of the Soviet Union, Russia attempted—rather unsuccessfully—to erase the Soviet legacy and portray itself as a promoter of democratic values and human rights. Between 2000 and 2020, Putin transformed the political institutions and built a “sovereign state with Russian values.” From this perspective, the official emphasis on the uniqueness of Russian civilization, combined with assertive foreign policy, diminished the attractiveness of Russia radically in terms of soft power compared to

other prominent international actors. Therefore, Moscow opted to create mechanisms that could effectively communicate specific values, interests, and goals abroad to facilitate foreign policy objectives despite Russia’s soft power limits. These mechanisms can be studied through the lens of another concept, namely, “sharp power.”

Introduced by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, sharp power describes “authoritarian influence efforts that seek to pierce, penetrate, and perforate the political and information environments of targeted countries.”⁵ From the analytical perspective, the sharp power notion allows for a more accurate assessment of the forces shaping Russian information flows abroad. As this report will demonstrate, Russia’s strategic communication is Moscow’s principal vehicle of sharp power that enables the Putin government to “cut into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions.”⁶

This report is organized as follows. First, there is a discussion of the institutionalization of Russian strategic communication, paying particular attention to the RT TV channel as the essential instrument of the Russian government’s communication strategy. Next, the specific characteristics of Russia’s return to Latin America and the Caribbean are explained, focusing on the particular context in which strategic communication became a vital engagement tool. Third, the main narratives employed by RT and other media outlets in the region are identified. Finally, recommendations on mitigating Moscow’s efforts are provided.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: THE CASE OF RT AND SPUTNIK

At the initial stage of the institutionalization of Moscow’s strategic communication⁷ in the early 2000s, the desire to use soft power was the Kremlin’s point of departure.⁸ Therefore, the organization of a state-sponsored TV channel to broadcast abroad became a priority. In the beginning, Moscow did not have a clear strategy. Initially, the channel would promote Russia’s cultural advancements and showcase today’s Russia. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the attractiveness of Russia’s political model and cultural or technological achievements to people

living in other countries as the only narrative would not alone suffice as the broad agenda of international communication. During this period, Russia was perceived as a weak and troubled state, not one that would be attractive abroad in conventional terms of soft power.⁹ Therefore, the Putin government needed a tool of strategic communication that would be both capable of delivering Russia's message worldwide and sufficiently flexible to make adjustments following changes in foreign policy objectives. The organizational design of RT fully responded to this goal (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. RT MEDIA MODEL

Purpose	To serve as a tool of Russia's strategic communication
Main narrative	Changing from projecting Russia's soft power (2005-2008) to criticism of the United States and Western democracies (post-2008)
Ideology	Anti-West
Control	Hiring loyalists for key positions, assigning stories, and offering monetary incentives to staff
Ownership	State
Hiring Journalists	Supervised by the government
Profits	Non-profit driven
Redlines	Criticism of the Russian government
Self-Censorship	High

Source: Adapted from Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos:" The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT), *Journal of Communication*, Volume 70, Issue 5 (October 2020): 641, doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa027.

On June 6, 2005, the news agency RIA Novosti announced the launch of the Russia Today television channel to "reflect the Russian position on the main issues of international politics."¹⁰ The 25-year-old journalist Margarita Simonyan became editor-in-chief and CEO of the company. Russia Today began broadcasting in English only. As Moscow's need for strategic communication broadened, RIA Novosti added the Arabic language channel Rusiya Al-Yaum in 2007. In 2009, the channel changed its name to RT.¹¹ Two years later, RT launched the Spanish language channel RT Actualidad, RT America for the U.S. audience in 2010, and the RT documentary channel in 2011.

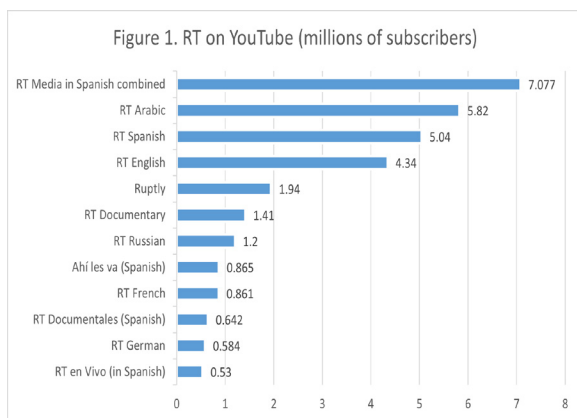
Accurate data regarding RT's actual global reach is not available. Some reports suggest that RT overestimates the share of its participation in the information market globally.¹² Still, according to the latest reports, RT's audience could be as many as 800 million viewers worldwide.¹³ RT claims to use more than two dozen satellites and over 300 operators, distributing information feeds to more than 100 countries.¹⁴ RT's workforce has also grown substantially. In 2005, for example, Russia Today employed 300 journalists, including approximately 70 from outside Russia. By 2010, RT's staff accounted for 2,000 employees.¹⁵ Two years later, the channel moved its production to a new high-tech facility in Moscow, upgraded its broadcasting to high-definition, and opened new fully-owned subsidiaries, including news agency Ruptly,¹⁶ RT en Français (French), and RT Deutsch (German).¹⁷

A review of the institutionalization of Russia's strategic communication via media outlets would be incomplete without mentioning the Sputnik news agency. It is part of the same organizational framework as RT. The agency's head office is in Moscow, with regional offices in Washington, Cairo, Beijing, Montevideo, and Bishkek. In addition, Sputnik's websites, podcasts, and traditional open-air broadcasting services operate in more than 30 languages, with over 16 million social media subscribers.¹⁸

When it comes to the financial support received by RT for its operations, reliable data is again limited. According to publicly available information, RIA Novosti invested \$30 million in start-up costs in 2005 and financed several subsequent years of operations at similar numbers. Since a significant part of RT's operation costs consists of distributing its feed to audiences abroad—which extended dramatically—the budget increased from \$80 million in 2007 to at least \$380 million in 2011.¹⁹ Moreover, the Putin government decided to include RT in the list of Russia's strategic enterprises with guaranteed funding. Annual support to Russia's strategic communication via media outlets accounted for \$540 million between 2016 and 2020.²⁰ In 2021, the approved budget for all Russian information agencies increased to \$700 million,²¹ recognition of the crucial role the channel plays as a tool of strategic communication.

Another indicator of RT and Sputnik’s activities in the information space is their geographical distribution. Here it is necessary to emphasize that the geographical distribution of RT followers is unequal. At some point, RT and affiliated media outlets had been one of the rising foreign sources of information for a specific type of viewer in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and other European countries. Yet, the RT audience in Western countries is unstable and likely to decline due to public debates about the role of these media in the information space. In other parts of the world, particularly in Latin America, Russian efforts at strategic communication are more successful for several reasons. One is the specific features of the media market in the region, including the relatively weak presence of foreign news media broadcasting programs in Spanish made specifically for the Latin American audience. The other reasons are the poorly satisfied demands of various strata of society for coverage of international topics and the growing use of the internet and social media platforms as news sources.²²

From the above perspective, one of the factors that facilitated the growth of the RT audience is the pioneering use of YouTube and social media networks. In 2013, for instance, RT made headlines becoming the first TV channel to reach one billion views on YouTube.²³ By 2020, RT claimed another record by reaching 10 billion views on YouTube.²⁴ As of 2021, RT in English had over four million subscribers, while RT in Spanish had more than five million subscribers, and RT in Arabic had almost six million²⁵ (see Figure 1).



Note: As of August 2021.

Source: Created by author with data from YouTube, July 2021.

Despite the diversity of programs and different approaches to distinct regions of the world, a close examination of the content produced by RT, Sputnik, and affiliated agencies reveals several standard features. First, RT is an “opportunistic channel.” Russian media constantly include politically unrelated news and reports like sensationalized bulletins in its feed. This strategy aims to recruit new followers who otherwise would not be interested in getting information from RT or Sputnik.²⁶ 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.²⁷ For instance, as Sean Steiner and Sarah Oates have shown, RT in Spanish responds almost immediately to the government’s official statements and announcements by including corresponding narratives in its information feeds.²⁸

Third, Russian strategic communication via mass media is tailor-made for specific regions. It is different from Soviet propaganda, which used communist ideology as a universal base to showcase the Soviet political system and spread communist ideas worldwide. For example, RT and Sputnik programs destined for Western Europe emphasize conservative “traditional values,” which are attractive to ultraconservative and nationalist sectors of European societies. The anchors of programs for European audiences choose to invite experts and analysts considered reliable by a conservative audience. As a result, there are limits to the further growth of RT’s influence in this region.

In other parts of the world, RT’s “information menu” varies. It is designed to take advantage of opportunities 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. The other programs, however, may appeal to a broader audience. For instance, some of the Documentales de RT channel reports have millions of views and target heterogeneous audiences. These include sports and programs ded-

icated to high-tech products often anchored by celebrities associated with political forces other than the Latin American left.²⁹ In these reports, RT presenters align their views with centrist and even right-wing political ideologies.³⁰ With Latin American societies becoming ideologically more polarized,³¹ 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 different viewers.³² This is the true meaning of RT's slogan "*sepa más*" ("know more").

Finally, Russian media dedicate a substantial part of its programs to dispute the U.S. political system and Washington's global and regional policies. As tensions in U.S.-Russian relations increased, Putin's government came to appreciate the opportunities of using RT and Sputnik as a strategic communication tool even more. Russia's strategic communication via RT and Sputnik vis-à-vis the United States is twofold. First, it casts doubt on the viewpoint of the United States and its allies on critical international topics while offering alternative explanations of key global events to a foreign audience. In addition, the media controlled by the Russian government attacks the values of liberal democracy and portrays authoritarian regimes as more suitable for solving the problems of contemporary societies. In many cases, RT's information flow is no less than deliberate disinformation intended to mislead its viewers.³³ While this facet of Russia's strategic communication can be identified in all world regions, it is in Latin America where the anti-U.S. narrative dominates. As discussed in more detail below, the logic of symbolic reciprocity is the main driving force of Russian engagement.

RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Today, Russia is back in Latin America and the Caribbean, and its visibility in the region has never been as strong. Moscow maintains diplomatic relations with all Latin American and Caribbean nations, Russian passport holders can travel freely in the region, and Russian govern-

ment officials are frequent visitors. In addition, the Kremlin became a key protagonist of important developments in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba.³⁴ There are several reasons behind Russia's decision to return to the Western Hemisphere. The notion of reciprocity is the foremost factor. Although it is easy to trace the genesis of this idea back to the Soviet Union, today, it is primarily *symbolic* reciprocity. The fact is, a majority of the elites that govern Russia today continue to view the entire Western Hemisphere as Washington's priority area of political, economic, and social concern.

Similarly, the top officials of Russia's government consider the territory of the former Soviet Union, a "near abroad," as the most important geographical area for Moscow outside Russia's borders.³⁵ 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.

Furthermore, most Russian elites believe the United States constantly ignores the Kremlin's interests in the former Soviet territories and, consequently, Russia must maintain its presence in Latin America, a U.S. "near abroad," as a reciprocal action. Also, there is a consensus in Moscow that the presence of Russia in the Western Hemisphere constitutes a factor that could help the Kremlin negotiate with Washington regarding the U.S. presence in the neighboring territories of Russia and other regions of Moscow's concern. Therefore, in its 2013 foreign doctrine, the Kremlin assigned "strategic" importance to its relations with Latin America. In other words, for Putin's Russia, one of the critical values of Latin America and the Caribbean is its geographical proximity to the United States.

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 crises in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, the Russian government expressed its concerns re-

garding the U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea and the support offered by Washington to anti-Russian forces in Georgia and Ukraine.³⁶ Back then, 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 deterioration of the situation in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The active participation of Moscow in Venezuela's latest crisis is yet another manifestation of the symbolic reciprocity approach in Latin America.³⁷ Since Russia has limited conventional resources, it, therefore, resorts more frequently to asymmetrical methods than traditional engagement tools.

Furthermore, the notion of symbolic reciprocity extends beyond the practical capacity to dispatch strategic bombers and naval ships to the U.S.'s "backyard." In Russia today, Latin America and the Caribbean occupy a unique place in the government-controlled media's information effort. The period in Russian-Latin American relations that followed the arrival of Putin to the height of political power in Moscow saw regular visits by Russian senior officials to Latin America and the Caribbean and vice versa. These official contacts received extensive coverage from Russian mass media in Latin America. In this context, the narrative delivered through RT and other news agencies emphasized the new role of Russia as a global player. In addition, they stressed that the United States resisted the process of Russia regaining its due place in the international arena and opposed building a new multipolar order with the participation of Latin American partners.

The message conveyed via RT and Sputnik to Latin America highlights Russia's regained power in the international arena and the Kremlin's "constructive role" in the region. Taking advantage of the initial success of acquiring a loyal audience for its media outlets, Moscow now wants to use them as primary tools of strategic communication in the Western Hemisphere, seeking to misinform viewers regarding the policies of the United States, its allies, and democratic governments in the region.

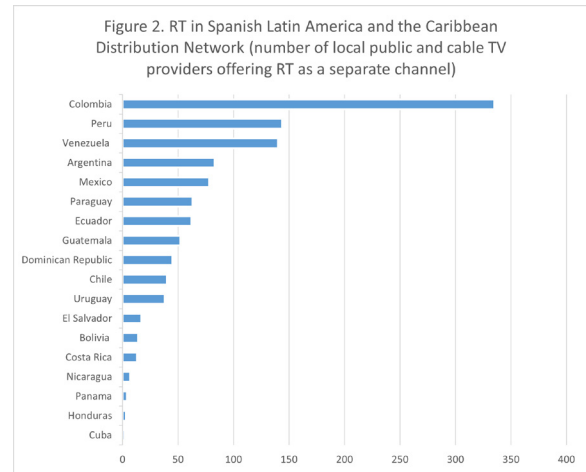
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN LATIN AMERICA

As analyzed previously, the prospective for further growth of Russian media in Western countries is uncertain. However, in Latin America, Russia relies on RT in Spanish and the Sputnik news networks to a significantly greater degree than in many other regions.³⁸ There are several reasons why Russian foreign-language broadcasting targets viewers in regions like Latin America:

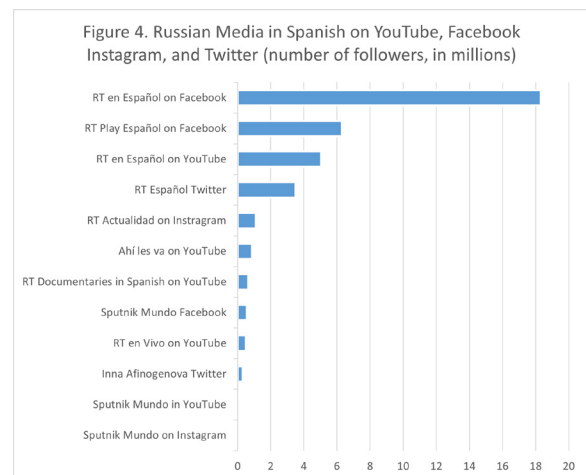
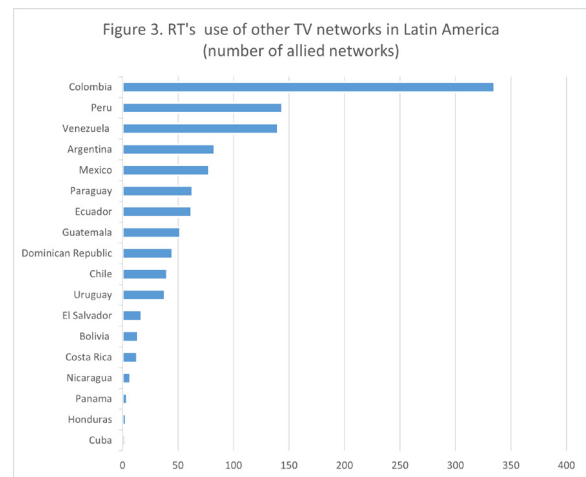
- Russia's government is aware it is difficult to compete with established media in the United States and Western Europe to attract new audiences by offering an alternative vision of international and domestic events. For this reason, although RT started by broadcasting in English to viewers in English-speaking Western countries, it later turned most of its attention to developing regions like Latin America.
- Despite the significant presence of Western media in English in Latin America, foreign news providers in Spanish were limited until recently. At the same time, people in the region had requested more diverse coverage of political and international topics compared to the mainstream local media.³⁹ Hence, from the Russian perspective, media markets in Latin America would respond favorably to new international broadcasters in Spanish if the new outlets would provide a different perspective on critical subjects of public interest.⁴⁰
- Russia often faces difficulties allocating tangible resources to implement its policy agenda using traditional instruments of power like trade and investment in Latin America.⁴¹ Therefore, this explains Moscow's attempts to sustain and expand its influence by using a sharp power toolkit with information as one of the principal components considered cost-effective by the Russian government to achieve its foreign policy goals, namely, diminishing the relative power of the United States and discrediting democracy as a political system.

Looking back at the history of Russia's post-Cold War presence in the Latin American information space, the RT channel began continuously offering extensive coverage of international events and comprehensive coverage of regional and local Latin America and Caribbean developments in 2009. Ten years later, the channel is readily available everywhere in the region. In some cases, RT in Spanish is made available as part of public TV broadcasting systems (Argentina,⁴² Venezuela, and Cuba) or as part of the state satellite system in Bolivia. In other countries, such as Colombia, in addition to Claro—the principal cable provider in the country—hundreds of small local cable networks retransmit RT programming (Figure 2).⁴³ RT pays cable operators to carry its signal on allied networks and therefore makes it difficult to end collaboration with Moscow—in many cases, Russian funding helps smaller operators survive in the market.⁴⁴

RT also has agreements to broadcast programs on local channels; viewers often are unaware the information they receive comes from Russia (Figure 3). This approach allows RT to extend the reach of Russia's strategic communication to potentially millions of additional viewers in Latin America. At the same time, RT is freely available 24 hours per day and online. As of August 2021, RT in Spanish on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT/) had more than 18 million followers. The RT in Spanish YouTube channel has over five million subscribers, and RT Play in Spanish on Facebook has more than six million followers. Finally, more than 3.5 million people follow RT in Spanish's Twitter account twitter.com/actualidadrt (Figure 4).⁴⁵



Note: As of August 2021.
Source: Created by the author with data from RT.com, actualidad.rt.com/acerca/cobertura/.



Note: As of August 2021.
Source: Created by the author with data from YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

Concerning the geographic scope and audience reach, by the beginning of the 2020s, the Russian advance in the Latin American information space was unparalleled compared to other world regions. It allowed Moscow to design and test various strategic communication strategies. Today, the most important Russian media outlets operating in Latin America are RT in Spanish (a TV and YouTube channel), *Sputnik Mundo* radio and news network, and the Russia Beyond website. RT, in particular, has become a true success story. For instance, in one month—September 2020—according to SimilarWebdata, RT’s Spanish-language website had more than 24 million visitors.⁴⁶ Another example of RT’s approach is the *Ahí les va* YouTube channel and webpage⁴⁷ (www.ahilesva.info/) with only one anchor and presenter, Inna Afinogenova.⁴⁸ Since its October 2019 launch, the channel is rapidly gaining popularity in the region, not least because Afinogenova directly engages local news celebrities in public debates on sensitive topics.⁴⁹ In the context of Russia’s strategic communication, the most popular videos published on Afinogenova’s channel are the ones dedicated to regional political processes, including the 2021 elections in Ecuador (three million viewers) and the 2020 elections in Bolivia (2.3 million viewers).⁵⁰

A detailed examination of RT programming destined for the Latin American audience reveals most content is, indeed, strategic communications designed to challenge the United States and its allies on politically sensitive issues for Latin Americans. The RT presenters and their guests provide alternative explanations to those projected by domestic and international “mainstream media” regarding migration, U.S.-Latin American bilateral relations, interactions with European Union countries, and other topics. At the same time, they portray Russia and regimes friendly to Moscow as a solid alternative to the liberal democratic model, a scenario in which political arrangements may offer better and more effective solutions to the problems experienced by Latin American democracies.

Although Russian media in Latin America started by offering programs originally produced for English-speaking audiences and translated into Spanish, today, a significant part of the region’s Russian TV broadcast and newsfeeds are designed specifically for Latin American viewers and readers, demonstrating a surprising

knowledge of the regional context. More than 30 mostly native Spanish-speaking journalists work for the channel.⁵¹ Russian media offers professional quality programs targeting all age groups.

From the perspective of symbolic reciprocity, the purpose of Russian strategic communication by mass media outlets in Latin America is to polarize opinions, which may raise public uncertainty in the actions and policies of the United States and democratic governments in the region. RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo use an “adapted persuasion” approach, in which the messages address specific audiences and can have a more significant impact on viewers. RT’s programming in Latin America consists of reports, interviews, and investigative journalism, many of which directly discredit U.S. domestic and foreign policies. According to a recent study by the Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab), between January 2019 and July 2020, three leading sub-headlines on the RT website *actualidad.rt.com* included “EE.UU.” (Spanish abbreviation for “United States”), presidente, and “Washington.” In addition, the same study exposed that the news links shared by RT in Spanish on Facebook (*RT en Español*) regularly focused on U.S.-related topics.⁵² The anti-U.S. approach is also seen in RT’s continuous coverage of almost all Latin American-focused topics, including migration, liberal democracy, and economic and social issues (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. SAMPLE PROGRAMS AND NARRATIVES OF RT IN SPANISH

Program name	The RT-defined emphasis of the program	Program sample	Description of sample episode as published on YouTube
Detrás de la noticia	<p>“What is left behind the news?</p> <p>In this RT program, the lawyer and writer Eva Golinger opens a space to debate and investigate the most important events in Latin America and the United States. We invite you to immerse yourself in a territory full of controversial events examined from a wide variety of opinions.”</p>	<p>Castas de gente en EE.UU. (June 17, 2021) youtu.be/An870Y8qI7c</p>	<p>The ultra-rich in the United States have evaded paying most of their personal taxes for years, hiding the vastness of their wealth to avoid the rules of the financial system. Cheating or naivety? The message of Biden’s vice president, Kamala Harris, contradicts the words of the U.S. president during his election campaign.</p>
RT Reporta	<p>“Explosive statements, imperceptible gestures, subtle details. Everything that our correspondents experience, first-hand, in their day-to-day work, now comes to you through ‘RT reports’. A program that allows us to know, through the personal and incisive gaze of journalists who make RT, what happens in front of and behind the cameras in every part of the world where the events that become news take place.”</p>	<p>Estados Unidos, la lucha por el agua (October 25, 2019)</p> <p>youtu.be/oRY-3HfFYW3g</p>	<p>Not having drinking water could seem like a problem in the poorest places on the planet, a totally alien and distant reality for many people. However, in the world’s leading economy, the United States, thousands of families lack safe water for their consumption. What is it like to live without the most basic good for human life?</p>
Conversando con Correa	<p>Interview series with prominent political figures and intellectuals conducted by the former president of Ecuador Rafael Correa.</p>	<p>Interview with Evo Morales (November 21, 2019)</p> <p>youtu.be/p0vJi8d-nud0</p>	<p>In this edition of ‘Conversing with Correa’, the former president of Ecuador talks with the former president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, about the events that are shaking the Andean country in the middle of a coup and about the causes that have led to this tragic scene. “The right mounted its campaign from the USA. Traditional campaigns are no longer as important as networks.”</p>
El Zoom	<p>“What do the photos of the current international scene intend to show us?” Support Russia’s official stand on international topics.</p>	<p>Estados Unidos: ¿Sistema en colapso? January 15, 2021) youtu.be/L6_KpGkFAs4</p>	<p>‘El Zoom’ returns in 2021 analyzing the serious situation in the US after the presidential elections and the successive political and social confrontations. Javier Rodríguez Carrasco reveals the keys to this crisis and the reasons for a chaos in which electoral fraud, impeachment processes and cross accusations are mixed in an explosive cocktail.</p>

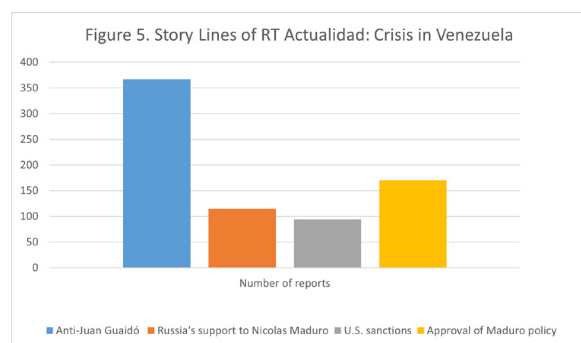
Source: RT en Español YouTube

The existence of diverse audiences spread throughout Latin America allows Russian media outlets to communicate information regarding the latest developments in line with the priorities of Moscow’s regional foreign policy agenda. In recent years, two items have been on top of that agenda: the crisis in Venezuela and the COVID-19 pandemic.

RT's Coverage of Venezuela

For RT and Sputnik Mundo, the crisis in Venezuela is one of the priorities of media coverage in Latin America. According to Sean Stainer and Sarah Oates, there are several key messages in Russia's strategic communication regarding Venezuela: "The United States wants Venezuela's oil," "The United States will create provocations," and "The United States is hypocritical and caused the crisis."⁵³ However, the most important narrative fits perfectly with the logic of symbolic reciprocity: "The United States wants regime change."⁵⁴ 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. RT also links the Venezuelan crisis with "traditional imperialism and colonialism of the United States" and calls U.S. support of the opposition the "imperial games."

As part of Russia's strategic communication agenda, RT is mobilized to provide information backing Nicolas Maduro's regime while justifying Moscow's aid to Caracas as a necessary move to protect the world "against malign U.S. intentions." Between January 2019 and June 2021, several main storylines can be identified (see Figure 5).



Source: *Headlines, RT Actualidad, January 2020 – June 2021, actualidad.rt.com/*⁵⁵

First, RT aimed to discredit Juan Guaidó and cast doubts on his legitimacy and capacity to govern. The Russian media outlet also emphasized that Venezuela's interim president "was kept afloat by the unrestricted support of the United States, which became the main architect of the pressure against the South American country and tried, unsuccessfully, to force the departure of Maduro."⁵⁶ Overall, RT aired more than 300 reports in which the name of Juan Guaidó appeared in the headlines of its newsfeed.

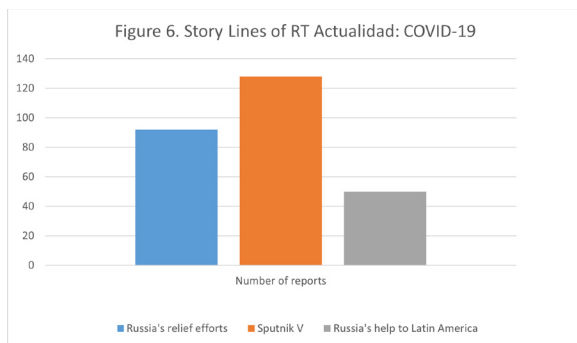
Another storyline is dedicated to the impact of U.S. sanctions. RT pretended to convince its viewers that the main reason behind Venezuela's catastrophic situation was not the disastrous economic policy of the Chavista government but, rather, U.S. sanctions. In this context, RT dedicated numerous reports to praising the efforts of Maduro's government to govern the country with timely assistance offered by Moscow.

RT's Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was beneficial for Russian strategic communication. Starting in March 2020, Russian media outlets began disseminating a particular type of COVID-19 narrative that took advantage of uncertainty and confusion in Latin America regarding the new virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, the reports aired by RT and other affiliated media outlets focused on Russia's effort to provide relief to the population and effectively manage the risks associated with COVID-19.⁵⁷ RT aired many reports covering Russian government donations of pharmaceuticals and high-tech medical equipment. In practical terms, the offerings were small. Yet, the Moscow-controlled media provided comprehensive coverage of the effect Russia's delivery of donations had on friendly Latin American nations.

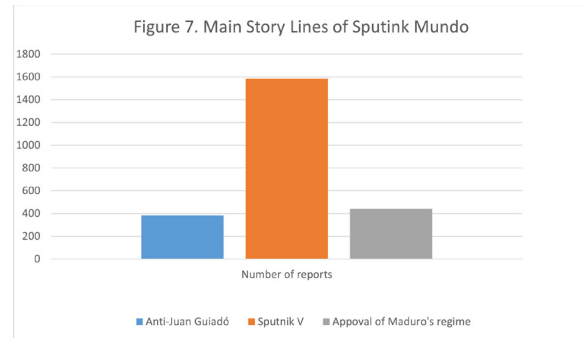
The COVID-related strategic communication originating in Russia and destined for Latin America changed following the announcement of the "Sputnik-V" vaccine and the beginning of the "COVID vaccine race." First, the news of registering the Sputnik-V vaccine was interpreted as evidence of Russia being one of the most technologically advanced nations,⁵⁸ which is "often denied this status in the region because of bad publicity originated in the Western mass

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 all the necessary protocols and tests, but because of their political ties with Washington. This type of strategy has already created several noticeable tensions in the Latin American information space.⁵⁹ Recently, 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 (Figure 6).



Source: *Headlines RT Actualidad, March 2020 – June 2021, actualidad.rt.com/.*⁶⁰

When reviewing the activity of Russia's media outlets in the region, it is essential to examine Sputnik Mundo, another critical instrument of Russia's strategic communication toolkit.⁶¹ Between January 2020 and June 2021, this news agency complemented RT's coverage of the Venezuelan crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America. The head of Sputnik Mundo emphasized in an interview that it does not follow the same information strategy as RT.⁶² Yet, Sputnik Mundo's ultimate objectives fit Russia's strategic communication perfectly (Figure 7).



Source: *mundo.sputniknews.com/. Note: Main story line from June 2020 to July 2021.*⁶³

CONCLUSION

By 2021, RT and other Russian government-sponsored media became a familiar source of information for many Latin Americans. Moscow managed to bring back to Latin Americans 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. At the same time, while RT and Sputnik Mundo are undoubtedly attractive to anti-U.S. segments of Latin American society, the Russian media succeeded in recruiting other types of followers by offering diverse programming that targets heterogeneous audiences. Although some scholars argue that RT's immediate impact on its foreign audience is “exposure, not endorsement,”⁶⁴ other studies show that today, RT information coverage is an aggressive purposeful intervention in international media space that goes beyond a simple dissemination of Moscow's overarching narratives.⁶⁵

There are several reasons why the potential of Russia's strategic communication in Latin America via its media outlets should not be underestimated. First, RT in Spanish and Sputnik Mundo have established a strong presence in the Latin American information space, including TV broadcasting, radio, social media networks, and digital platforms with millions of followers. Second, RT and Sputnik Mundo have guaranteed funding and, as such, can expand their reach by contracting new operators and offering their programs and newsfeeds via other TV channels and news agencies. RT pays local operators to carry its TV signal and thus makes it difficult for

them to stop collaborating with Moscow. Third, RT and Sputnik Mundo use a “tailor-made” approach to targeting diverse segments of Latin American societies and can quickly adapt their storylines following the changing priorities of Russia’s foreign policy toward the region.

One of the factors behind RT’s success in Latin America is a lack of understanding of the nature of Moscow’s interest in the region’s information space. Many Latin Americans perceive the growing incidence of Russia’s media in the region as something “normal,” a part of the exercise of freedom of expression and diversity of opinions. In reality, however, it is part of a foreign policy strategy designed to achieve specific objectives by the Putin government. Russia thrives in 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.⁶⁶ The prevalence of like-minded democracies is what 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, which undermines the idea of democratic order.

Contrary to the United States and Western Europe,⁶⁷ the advance of Russia’s strategic communication in Latin America meets almost no opposition. There have been only a few public debates on RT and Sputnik in the regional information space. Besides, there have been no specific surveys to learn RT’s impact on Latin American public opinion. Still, the limited data, already available, shows that RT and Sputnik Mundo passed beyond the point of simply exposing their audiences to Russia’s strategic communication to begin engaging Latin Americans in discussing and disseminating narratives promoted by Moscow.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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. At present, U.S. government-sponsored information outlets have limited reach in the region. For instance, Voice of America in Spanish has only 160,000 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.

As Dmitriy Trenin and Andrei Lipsky argue,⁷⁰ the current confrontation of Russia with the West is not a new cold war. Nevertheless, many Russian decision-makers consider that Russia is at war. Not a “hot war,” but a new kind of confrontation. Even though the nature of the ongoing standoff is different from the historical Cold War, it can be characterized by a similar level of tensions with the United States and its allies. Moreover, elites in Moscow are convinced there is little hope the tensions will melt anytime soon. In this context, Russia will attempt to sustain and extend 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 toward the region.⁷¹

Finally, RT and Sputnik are not the only strategic communication tools used in Latin America, although they are the primary ones. In recent years Moscow has increased its public diplomacy efforts to communicate Russia’s grand narratives by opening Russian language institutes, recruiting students to study in Russia, and involving the Russian diaspora in regional public events. These emerging developments will benefit RT and Sputnik Mundo by providing news events to include in its information coverage.

END NOTES

1. Kofman and Rojansky dispute the universality of applying "hybrid" warfare to Russian activities abroad. See Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, *A Closer Look at Russia's "Hybrid War"* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2015). At the same time, Russian decision-makers regularly use the term. For them, a hybrid conflict "involves economic and political pressure to circumvent UN decisions and international law; the organization of mass protests; threats of military invasion; attempts to get rid of the top political leadership and aggressive propaganda." See "Patrushev claims hybrid impact on Venezuela from abroad," *RIA Novosti*, April 24, 2019; ria.ru/20190424/1552991931.html.
2. See, for example, Gregory Simons, "Russian Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Structure, Means and Message," *Public Relations Review* Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014): 440–449; Natalia Tsvetkova, *In Russia and the World: Understanding International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); and Natalia Tsvetkova, "Russian Digital Diplomacy: A Rising Cyber Soft Power?," in eds. Gregory Simons and Ann Velikaya, *Russia's Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 103–118.
3. Nicolas Michelsen and Thomas Colley, "The Field of Strategic Communications Professionals: A New Research Agenda for International Security," *European Journal of International Security*, Vol 4, No.1 (2019): 62, doi.org/10.1017/eis.2018.9.
4. Joseph Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, No. 1 (2008): 94–109, doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699.
5. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), 9 and 13, www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf.
6. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power.
7. Russia's strategic communication combines many types of activities: public diplomacy, nation branding, and information operations. The diversity and evolution of Russia's contemporary approaches are examined by Natalia Tsvetkova and Dmitry Rushchin, "Russia's Public Diplomacy: From Soft Power to Strategic Communication," *Journal of Political Marketing*, Vol 20, No.1 (2021): 50-59, doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2020.1869845.
8. Julia Ioffe, "What is Russia Today?," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September-October 2020, archives.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php.
9. As Rutland and Kazantsev emphasize, Moscow not only came late to the game, but also has to deal with a negative informative context regarding its image. See Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, "The limits of Russia's 'soft power,'" *Journal of Political Power*, Vol 9, No. 3 (2016): 395–413, doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232287.
10. "A propaganda TV channel for foreigners created in Russia," *Lenta.ru*, June 7, 2005, lenta.ru/news/2005/06/07/channel/. In addition to RT, there is another agency with a similar name, Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today). While it claims it is independent of RT, there is a close connection between the two. See Stephen Ennis, "Putin's RIA Novosti revamp prompts propaganda fears," *BBC.com*, December 9, 2013, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25309139.

11. According to Mona Elswah and Philip Howard, Russia Today rebranded and changed its name to RT, hoping its audience would overlook its Russian origins. See Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos": The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT), *Journal of Communication*, Volume 70, Issue 5 (2020): 623-645, doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa027.
12. Ioffe, "What is Russia Today?"
13. Novye Izvestiya. "The government will spend 211 billion rubles on Russia Today," *Yandex.News*, March 4, 2021, newizv.ru/news/society/04-03-2021/pravitelstvo-potratit-211-mlrd-rublej-na-povyshenie-reytinga-rt.
14. "About RT: Distribution," *RT.com*, accessed August 23, 2021, www.rt.com/about-us/distribution/.
15. Julian Evans, "Spinning Russia," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2005, foreignpolicy.com/2005/12/01/spinning-russia/; and "About Us," *RT.com*, accessed August 23, 2021, www.rt.com/about-us/.
16. The Ruptly webpage, www.ruptly.tv/en, is in four languages with two million subscribers to YouTube.
17. RT also has a website in Russian, with almost two million subscribers, www.rt.com/about-us/, accessed August 23, 2021, www.youtube.com/user/rtrussian.
18. "About us," *Sputniknews.com*, www.rt.com/about-us/, accessed August 23, 2021, sputniknews.com/docs/about/index.html.
19. Alpert Lukas, *Kremlin Speak: Inside Putin's Propaganda Factory* (Brooklyn, NY: Tatra Press, 2014).
20. "Kremlin Boosts Budget for TV Channel RT," *The Moscow Times*, December 1, 2016, www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/12/01/rt-channel-gets-additional-12-bln-rubles-a56375.
21. Novye Izvestiya, "The government will spend 211 billion rubles on Russia Today," *Yandex.News*, March 4, 2021, newizv.ru/news/society/04-03-2021/pravitelstvo-potratit-211-mlrd-rublej-na-povyshenie-reytinga-rt.
22. For contemporary internationalization trends of Latin American media space, see Juan Piñón, "A multilayered transnational broadcasting television industry: The case of Latin America," *International Communication Gazette*, 76 No. 3 (2014): 211–236, doi.org/10.1177/1748048513516906.
23. "RT Becomes First TV News Channel to Hit 1 Billion Views on YouTube," *Rt.com*, June 3, 2013, www.rt.com/news/rt-youtube-billion-views-033/
24. "RT—The First TV News Network in the World to hit 10 BLN Views on YouTube," *Rt.com*, January 29, 2020, www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-youtube-10-billion-views/.
25. In addition, the RT Twitter account in English has 2.9 million followers.
26. All Latin American journalists interviewed by the author understood this particular strategy of RT information coverage as the feature that differentiates it from other foreign media like BBC, CNN, DW, and others. Many of the videos published on YouTube were not politically sensitive but helped RT reach diverse audiences.
27. In an interview with the author, a former RT in Spanish employee explained he had been receiving detailed instructions regarding coverage of the most important topics, was aware of the general editorial line, and had to ensure his reports fit the broader editorial policy.

28. Sean Steiner and Sarah Oates, *Reading the RT Leaves: Foreign Policy Lessons from Russia International Media Coverage of Venezuela* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2019), 4, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-43-reading-the-rt-leaves-foreign-policy-lessons-russian-international.

29. For example, 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.

30. See, for example, 'Popeye': "Si Pablo Escobar me hubiera dicho que matara a mi padre, lo mato," Documental de RT, April 16, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EARXLKhKpCg&ab_channel=RTenEspa%C3%B1ol, which has 5.5 million views; and "El pueblo del Mariscal: 10 días en Corea del Norte," Documental de RT, October 27, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWRnG8iEJMQ&ab_channel=RTenEspa%C3%B1ol, which has 3.8 million views.

31. Joseph Wornom, "A Continent Divided: Political Polarization and the Future of Latin American Democracy," *Harvard International Review*, January 17, 2020, hir.harvard.edu/a-continent-divided-political-polarization-and-the-future-of-latin-american-democracy-2/.

32. In recent years, RT has actively used disinformation to influence ideologically rigid elections in some countries. David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, "Russian influence in Mexican and Colombian elections," Alliance for Securing Democracy, January 4, 2018, securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russian-influence-in-mexican-and-colombian-elections/. In addition, several other Russian government-controlled media were actively engaged in promoting Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in the Mexican presidential elections, DFRLab, *#ElectionWatch: RT y Sputnik Hablan Español*, February 12, 2018, medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-rt-y-sputnik-hablan-espa%C3%B1ol-bd641bf7d23e.

33. Robert Elliott, "How Russia spreads disinformation via RT is more nuanced than we realise," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2019, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/26/russia-disinformation-rt-nuanced-online-ofcom-fine.

34. Vladimir Rouvinski, "Kennan Cable No.20: Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America" (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, February 2017), www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no20-understanding-russian-priorities-latin-america,

35. According to Article 67.1 of the Russian Constitution, "Russia is The Russian Federation is the ... successor of the USSR." According to Putin, "the succession of the Russian Federation from the Soviet Union is obvious." *RT.ru*, March 2, 2020, rg.ru/2020/03/02/putin-predlozhil-popravku-o-tom-chto-rossia-iaavljaetsia-pravopreemnikom-sssr.html.

36. In 2008, some of the titles of the news reports by Russia's government-controlled media were: "Russia is concerned about the buildup of NATO ships in the Black Sea," *Ria Novosti*, August 25, 2008, hria.ru/20080825/150651454.html; "Putin: Russia will respond to the presence of foreign ships in the Black Sea," *Ria Novosti*, September 2, 2008, hria.ru/20080902/150896338.html; and "Russian Foreign Ministry doubts Mount Whitney's humanitarian mission in the Black Sea," *Ria Novosti*, September 5, 2008, hria.ru/20080905/150997668.html. In 2014, Russia's reaction was similar. See "US Navy destroyer Donald Cook entered the Black Sea," *Tass*, April 10, 2014, tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1112077.

37. Vladimir Rouvinski, "Venezuela: Russia's Gordian Knot in Latin America," in *Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: the Ties That Bind?*, ed. Cynthia J. Arnson (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2021), 24-57, www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/LAP_210510-Venezuelas%20Authoritarian%20Allies-V5.pdf.

38. The other region of RT expansion is the Middle East. For more on Russian media efforts in the Middle East, see Anna Borschevskaya and Catherine Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Notes, No. 57 (2018), www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-why-it-matters.

39. As Hughes and Lawson show, Latin American local media has many obstacles to changing the traditional patterns of its programs, which rarely include significant issues like democracy, values, and freedoms. See Sallie Hughes and Chappell Lawson, "The Barriers to Media Opening in Latin America," *Political Communication*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2005): 9-25, doi.org/10.1080/10584600590908410.

40. As Morales argued, Russian media in Spanish emulates the style and format of well-known Western media, yet it advances its own media agenda. See Pablo Sebastian Morales, "Mind the (cultural) gap: International news channels and the challenge of attracting Latin American audiences," *Media, Culture and Society* Vol. 43, No. 4 (2021): 648-663. As of 2021, besides Russia, there are four other non-Hispanic extra-hemispheric TV broadcasters in Spanish: China, Iran, Germany, and France, in addition to pan-European *Euronews* (Spanish edition), *BBC Mundo* and *Al Jazeera* maintain dedicated websites and produce videos in Spanish but do not offer Spanish-language live TV broadcasts.

41. According to the World Bank, in 2019, combined U.S. imports and exports with Latin America and the Caribbean reached US\$760 billion. China's trade with the region amounted to US\$307 billion. However, Russia's combined import-export was only US\$14 billion, or less than 1 percent of total Latin American annual foreign trade, wits.worldbank.org/. The same year, the U.S. investments made in Central and South America were valued at approximately US\$250.1 billion, and China's FDI stock was estimated at US\$436 billion. Russian investments in the region do not exceed US\$170 million, per [statista.com](https://www.statista.com).

42. When the government of Mauricio Macri in 2016 attempted to remove RT from Argentina's national broadcasting, Moscow fiercely resisted the decision. As a result, the Argentine government revised its original move, and RT remained in the public service broadcasting system.

43. The only major Latin American country missing from the RT orbit is Brazil. It is likely the costs of opening a channel in Portuguese, with potentially much smaller numbers of viewers than a Spanish channel, are prohibitive for Moscow. However, Sputnik news maintains a Portuguese-language website focused on Brazil, br.sputniknews.com/.

44. The cable networks are not disclosing information about payments. However, in an interview with the author, a manager of a Colombian TV channel confirmed his channel had received payments from RT to retransmit its programs. This is a common practice for RT in other regions as well. See, for example, the case of Canada: Susan Krashinsky Robertson, "Canadian TV providers being paid to carry Russian 'propaganda machine'," *The Globe and Mail*, December 21, 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/canadian-tv-providers-receive-payments-to-carry-russian-propaganda-machine/article37400743/. For the U.S. case, see Shalini Ramachandran, "RT Channel's Unique Carriage Deals Make It Difficult to Drop in U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/rt-channels-unique-carriage-deals-make-it-difficult-to-drop-in-u-s-1485361056.

45. Most of the publications on RT Play Facebook are sensationalized videos, but the page also posts RT feeds in Spanish. It is a twofold strategy. First, by showing politically unrelated but popular videos, the channel aspires to attract viewers who otherwise would not be interested in using RT in Spanish as a source of information. Second, by building a heterogeneous audience, RT can expose these viewers to Moscow's propaganda.

46. "Website Analysis: actualidad.rt.com," *Similarweb.com*, accessed September 6, 2021, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/companyresearch/websiteanalysis/overview/website-performance/actualidad.rt.com/*/999/2020.07-2020.09.

47. "Guaidó votará (con Maduro en el poder) en las elecciones regionales: ¿qué cambió para que suceda?," ¡Ahí les va!, RT, accessed August 23, 2021, www.ahilesva.info/.

48. From time to time, RT airs videos featuring other presenters. As of August 2021, however, the overwhelming majority of published reports feature Afinogenova only.

49. For example, in December 2020, 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. "La crítica con la que Inna Afinogenova destrozó un artículo de Semana sobre Russia Today," *Las2Orillas.co*, December 23, 2020, www.las2orillas.co/la-critica-con-la-que-inna-afinogenova-destrozo-un-articulo-de-semana-sobre-russia-today/.

50. "Elecciones en Ecuador: el legado de Lenin Moreno une al país ... en su contra," AhílesAa YouTube channel, February 12, 2011, youtu.be/luPqTLf9gmM; and "Bolivia: el partido de Evo arrasa en las elecciones (y deja en evidencia a la OEA y Luis Amargo)," AhílesAa YouTube Channel, October 20, 2020, youtu.be/-CQGMfxIIIk.

51. "Equipo de RT," Rt Actualidad, accessed August 23, 2021, actualidad.rt.com/acerca/equipo.

52. *A glimpse into RT's Latin American audience*, DFRLab, August 7, 2020, medium.com/dfrlab/a-glimpse-into-rts-latin-american-audience-487d52bed507.

53. See Sean P. Steiner and Sarah Oates, *Kennan Cable No.43: Reading the RT Leaves: Foreign Policy Lessons from Russia International Media Coverage of Venezuela* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2019), www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-43-reading-the-rt-leaves-foreign-policy-lessons-russian-international.

54. The number of RT's articles referencing the story "The U.S. Wants Regime Change" is significantly larger than all the others. See Steiner and Oates, *Kennan Cable No.43: Reading the RT Leaves*, 4.

55. The author reviewed all articles published on RT's Spanish webpage (rt.actualidad) between January 2020 and June 2021 mentioning the conflict in Venezuela at least once (total 618). From this sample, the author identified articles that included in their titles "Juan Guaidó," "Rusia," "Maduro," and "Sanciones," and examined their content to evaluate RT's viewpoint.

56. "Sanciones económicas y profundización de la crisis en Venezuela: el legado de la autoproclamación de Juan Guaidó," *Rt.actualidad*, January 5, 2021, actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/377286-dos-anos-autoproclamacion-juan-guaido-venezuela.

57. Daniel Bush, "Two Faces of Russian Information Operations: Coronavirus Coverage in Spanish," Stanford Internet Observatory, July 30, 2020, cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/two-faces-russian-information-operations-coronavirus-coverage-spanish.

58. The *RT in Spanish* interview with Alexander Guintsburg, head of the "Gamaleya" Research Center that produced "Sputnik-V" vaccines, has 1.3 million views, youtu.be/uqszk8EF1LU.

59. For example, in Colombia, the RT journalist was involved in polemics related to the "Sputnik-V" vaccine. See "¿Qué es RT, el medio de comunicación del gobierno ruso?," *Semana.com*, December 23, 2020, www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/que-es-rusia-today/202018/.

60. The author has reviewed articles published on the *RT in Spanish* webpage (rt.actualidad) between March 2020 and June 2021, which mentioned "new coronavirus" in the title (approximately 400). He then examined the content of selected articles to evaluate RT's viewpoint.

61. Nicolas de Pedro and Daniel Iriarte, "Cuando el Ruskiy Mir y el mundo hispanohablante se encuentran: RT y Sputnik en español," Colección Monografías CIDOB (Barcelona: Centre for International Affairs, November 2017), www.cidob.org/articulos/monografias/war_in_peacetime_russia_s_strategy_on_nato_s_eastern_and_southern_flanks/cuando_el_ruskiy_mir_y_el_mundo_hispanohablante_se_encuentran_rt_y_sputnik_en_espanol.
62. Interview with Miguel Bas at Sputnik's headquarters in Moscow, 14 December 2017.
63. The author identified articles published on Sputnik Mundo's webpage (mundo.sputniknews.com) between June 2020 and July 2021 that mentioned "Juan Guaidó," "Sputnik-V," and "Venezuela" in their headlines, and examined the selected articles' content to evaluate RT's viewpoint on these subjects.
64. Rhys Crilley, Marie Gillespie, Bertie Vidgen, and Alistair Willis, "Understanding RT's Audiences: Exposure Not Endorsement for Twitter Followers of Russian State-Sponsored Media," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (December 2020): 1-23, doi.org/10.1177/1940161220980692.
65. Elswah and Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos" (2020): 629-632.
66. Posture Statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller. Commander, United States Southern Command, 116th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, March 11, 2020, www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110692/witnesses/HHRG-116-AS00-Wstate-FallerC-20200311.pdf.
67. For details on some of the public debates in the United States and other countries, see Nataalka Pisnia, "Why has RT registered as a foreign agent with the US?," *BBC News*, November 15, 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41991683. In Colombia, the RT's journalist was involved in polemics related to the "Sputnik-V" vaccine, *Semana.com*, December 23, 2020, www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/que-es-rusia-today/202018/.
68. DFRLab's research established that Russian media outlets authentically engaged their followers—and gained new ones—on such sensitive topics as the Venezuelan crisis. See *A glimpse into RT's Latin American audience*, DFRLab.
69. Recently, YouTube and other platforms started placing a warning to viewers who watch RT videos. These measures are helpful, but more public action is needed.
70. Dmitry Trenin and Andrey Lipsky, "Russia and the United States are in a state of hybrid war. This is serious and for a long time," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 27, 2018, carnegie.ru/2018/09/27/ru-pub-77361.
71. According to Margarita Simonyan, Russia wants to have "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." "Russian media from inside. Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russia Today," translated from Russian, *Afisha Daily*, October 18, 2011, daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/archive/ministry-of-truth-simonyan/.

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