

A photograph of Vladimir Putin and Nicolás Maduro shaking hands. Putin is on the left, wearing a dark suit and a red patterned tie. Maduro is on the right, wearing a dark suit and a red tie. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a formal setting with blue and gold drapery and a portion of the Venezuelan flag is visible on the left.

# **THE LATIN AMERICAN FRONT**

**Russian Propaganda in Venezuela  
and Western Responses**

**Brian Whitmore**



Center *for*  
European Policy  
Analysis

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Center for European Policy Analysis  
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20004  
E-mail: [info@cepa.org](mailto:info@cepa.org)  
[www.cepa.org](http://www.cepa.org)

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# The Latin American Front

## Russian Propaganda in Venezuela and Western Responses

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# The Issue

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**T**he Russian propaganda about Venezuela is largely deploying the standard Kremlin toolkit with tropes like anti-globalization, support for nationalist strongmen, and opposition to popular democratic uprisings. But it is also adding a localized element that has particularly strong resonance in the region: the very real history of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the very real resentment that still lingers about this. This presents additional challenges for U.S. policy and strategic communications. Pushing back on the Russian propaganda effort requires an even more coordinated, persistent, and sustained effort than in other parts of the world. This approach should include greater familiarity with Latin America's fraught history with the United States, telling the American story more convincingly, increased emphasis on Russia's malign role in the region, and the effective use of surrogates.

## INTRODUCTION

An old specter is haunting Latin America, according to Russia's well-oiled propaganda machine: the specter of "Yankee imperialism." Judging from Moscow's narrative the year is really 1846 and Venezuela is actually Mexico. Or perhaps it is 1954 and Venezuela is Guatemala. Or maybe it is 1973 and we are in Chile. Or is it Nicaragua in the 1980s? Two more recent ghosts trouble Latin America as well: the memories of the Arab Spring in 2010-2011 and the bloody events in Kyiv three years later. In the Kremlin's telling, Venezuela is experiencing a replay of the Libyan or Syrian civil wars or the tense stalemate on the eve of the bloodshed of the Euromaidan in Ukraine. Russia's propaganda machine, it appears, has become a time machine.

As the political crisis drags on in Venezuela, the Kremlin is waging an aggressive disinformation campaign that is rich in historical metaphors and analogies. Running through them all is a common thread: the claim that the United States using the facade of supporting democracy to mask a hidden agenda of subjugating the world. Russia's supposed "U.S.-led neo-globalization" is just another form of colonization. In this contest the United States has a built-in handicap that Moscow is all too happy to exploit: the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the resentment in some corners—though far from all—that lingers as a result. The solution? Only Russian and Chinese help can save Latin America from this unhappy fate, or so Moscow's narrative goes. Ground zero in the struggle is Venezuela. "Venezuela is a key part of the current geopolitical chess match," Vicky Peláez recently wrote in the Kremlin's Spanish-language mouthpiece, *Sputnik Mundo*, "where Russia and China are challenging the self-proclaimed position of the United States as the

'hegemon' of the planet, combining economic aid to the Bolivarian model with the military industrial presence in the country."<sup>1</sup> Another favorite trope: America is simultaneously plotting to steal Venezuela's oil. In the spin cycle of coverage, the conspiracies are many. The facts are few.

What is more important is the bigger picture. Kremlin policy in Latin America is part of a broader strategy of spreading disorder beyond Russia's borders for strategic effect.<sup>2</sup> By demonstrating that it can create chaos in the Western hemisphere, Moscow is issuing an implicit warning to the West not to meddle in its own so-called "near abroad." Moreover, Vladimir Putin's regime is seeking to persuade Washington of the desirability of a nineteenth century model of world politics based on spheres of influence. As former Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio wrote recently: "By wielding a stick in Latin America, or at least poking a hornet's nest, [Putin] hopes to convince his Western rivals of the desirability of such an order. Perhaps more important, he wants to show the rest of the world that the U.S.-led order is faltering. What better way to achieve that than by challenging the oldest and most fundamental component of U.S. foreign policy, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine?"<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Russian propaganda effort advancing these goals in Venezuela relies on deploying the standard Kremlin toolkit by promoting themes of anti-globalization, support for nationalist strongmen, and opposition to popular democratic uprisings. But it is also adding a localized element that has particularly strong resonance in the region. Pushing back on the Russian propaganda effort surrounding Venezuela, therefore, requires an even more coordinated, persistent, and sustained effort than in other parts of the world. It also requires a recognition that unlike in Ukraine, Georgia, or

other parts of Eastern Europe, where American influence is widely viewed as benign, in some parts of Latin America the United States has a built-in handicap that Moscow is all too happy to exploit.

## YANKEE IMPERIALISM AND ‘ZOMBIE FEARS’

Kremlin-backed media in Latin America is pounding hard on the narrative that Washington’s recognition of Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s legitimate president is part of a centuries-old pattern of meddling by the United States in the region. “This is not the first time in history that the U.S. has tried to influence the affairs of Latin American countries,” *Sputnik Mundo* wrote recently in a piece that outlined U.S. interference dating back to the Mexican-American War.<sup>4</sup> “Mexico lost more than half of its territory as a result of the U.S. military intervention, which took place between 1846 and 1848, after Mexico broke diplomatic relations with Washington following the annexation of Texas. Now that territory is divided among the states of Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and part of Colorado, Oklahoma and Wyoming.” Likewise, a segment on RT’s Spanish-language channel portrayed U.S. policy toward Venezuela as a revival of Operation Condor, a U.S.-backed effort during the Cold War to eradicate communist influence in South America following a series of military and right-wing coups.<sup>5</sup> This narrative is simplistic — it is dead wrong to equate support for Guaidó with such episodes as the overthrow of Árbenz. But, if not challenged, it could have strong resonance in a region with a built-in skepticism about Washington, especially given Venezuela’s institutionalized “Bolivarian” anti-American propaganda that permeates society. More importantly, Moscow is attempting to exploit ‘zombie fears’ of long-

dead phenomena by conflating past U.S. interventions with Washington’s support for Guaidó, a figure who—judging from the size of the demonstrations in Caracas calling for

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“Kremlin policy  
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the ouster of Nicolas Maduro—has the strong support of his people. If backing Guaidó is “Yankee imperialism,” it is “imperialism” that is supported by most of the governments of Central and South America, not to mention Canada and much of the European Union.



“Miles de venezolanos exigen elecciones” by Voice of America under Public Domain.

## ALL ABOUT THE OIL

Closely related to the Kremlin’s attempts to exploit the anxiety of “Yankee imperialism” are Moscow’s efforts to revive another zombie fear: that Washington is after Venezuela’s hydrocarbons. In the Kremlin mouthpiece *Izvestia*, Igor Pshenichnikov of the Moscow-based Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, a regime-supported think tank, wrote that “the goal of the United States is not to bring peace to Venezuela, but to completely change the regime in the country and take control of its oil.”<sup>6</sup> Such a narrative is a perfect example of projection – something at which Vladimir Putin’s regime excels.

In fact, Moscow is eager to keep Nicolas Maduro in power because that would protect its own current stake in Venezuela’s oil sector. Rosneft, the Russian state-controlled oil company, is one of Venezuela’s largest foreign investors. It has pumped more than \$7 billion

into the country over the past five years, mostly in the form of loans to be repaid in future crude oil deliveries. The Venezuelan state-run oil and gas company, *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, supplied Rosneft with oil worth \$1.9 billion against the loans in 2017. That same year, moreover, Rosneft acquired a 49.9 percent share of the U.S.-based and Venezuelan-owned refiner *Citgo* as collateral for \$1.5 billion in loans to PDVSA.<sup>7</sup> Rosneft also has stakes in five onshore oil projects in Venezuela as well as two offshore gas projects.<sup>8</sup> Russia is so heavily invested in Venezuela’s oil industry, moreover, that Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin has been Moscow’s point man for relations with Nicolas Maduro’s government. In November 2018, Sechin reportedly flew to Caracas—in a visit that was not publicly disclosed—to meet Maduro and complain about delayed oil shipments.<sup>9</sup>

Moscow’s propaganda trope about how the United States is out to steal Venezuela’s oil is

a crafty bait-and-switch. It needs to be called out for what it is. According to analyst Pavel K. Baev, “If post-Maduro Venezuela were to open its oil sector to Western investments, this would pose a major threat to Russian oil interests – not least because sudden spikes in Venezuelan petroleum production could lower the international price below a level sufficient to fill Russia’s budget.”<sup>10</sup>

## A LATIN AMERICAN ‘MAIDAN’

The Kremlin is also trying to present events in Venezuela as part of a blueprint of U.S.-manufactured popular uprisings, including the former Yugoslavia, Georgia, and Ukraine. In his article in *Izvestia*, Pshenichnikov outlined the scenario for a stage-managed and American-sponsored revolution in Venezuela: “a rebellion by a handful of military officers, street demonstrations in the style of the Kyiv Maidan, the appearance of self-proclaimed President Juan Guaidó and lightning-fast recognition of his ‘legitimacy’ by the White House.”<sup>11</sup> One article in *Sputnik Mundo* claimed that the United States was attempting to provoke civil unrest and a Balkan-style conflict in Venezuela. “The sanctions and the financial blockade, the psychological warfare to sow hatred among Venezuelans, the weakening of trust in institutions due to their inability to cope with the deterioration of the material welfare of the population, are the breeding ground for this hypothesis of conflict,” the author, José Negrón Valera, wrote.<sup>12</sup> Others commentators accused Washington of waging a “hybrid war” against Maduro and of seeking to bribe military officers to stage a coup.<sup>13,14</sup>

By presenting the uprising in Venezuela as part of a pattern that includes Georgia and Ukraine,

the Kremlin disinformation offensive actually gets part of the picture right. These cases are indeed similar in that they all are examples of a popular uprising against corrupt, unpopular, and authoritarian regimes. What the Russian propaganda gets wrong, of course, is the false assertion that Washington manufactured these genuine popular uprisings. Here again, Moscow is to a degree engaging in projection. The Kremlin’s propaganda reveals the Putin regime’s deep fears of popular democratic

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“The Putin regime has a hard time imagining that an independent civil society can actually exist.”

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uprisings. As Baev notes, “what is a matter of principle for Putin is his self-serving proposition that authoritarian rulers, whether in Syria or Venezuela, cannot be removed from power by street protests.”<sup>15</sup> The Kremlin also is revealing its underestimation of the power of grassroots movements for change. Indeed, the Putin regime has a hard time imagining that an independent civil society can actually exist. Thus, when faced with citizens engaging in

mass civic action, the assumption is that they must be pawns of some outside power.

The Kremlin is also invoking the Arab Spring and its chaotic and bloody aftermath. By invoking Syria, the Russian propaganda effort appears to be doing two things: stoking fears about U.S. military intervention and, at the same time, implicitly threatening that Moscow would consider using force to support Maduro, as it did Assad. Ana Palacio, the former Spanish foreign minister, has noted that “the Kremlin has also employed other tactics from its Syria playbook,” including sending two nuclear-capable strategic bombers to Venezuela for highly-publicized “training missions” and encouraging rumors that Moscow plans to build a military airbase in Venezuela. Such a move, she noted, “would be the largest projection of Russian military force in Latin America since the Cuban Missile Crisis.”<sup>16</sup> *Sputnik Mundo* recently published an interview

with Venezuelan lawmaker Adel El Zabayar, who fought as a volunteer in Syria on the side of Bashar Al-Assad, on the lessons that conflict holds for Venezuela — that U.S. involvement leads to upheaval and Russian intervention can turn the tide.<sup>17</sup>

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE

As elsewhere in the world, the Russian propaganda effort in Latin America is a well-coordinated and well-financed operation that masks a deeply cynical agenda. Unmasking and countering it will require an equally coordinated and financed response that understands the specific strengths and vulnerabilities that the United States has in the region.

Specifically, lingering suspicion in Latin America about U.S. motives poses challenges for countering Moscow’s disinformation offensive



“Tupolev Tu-160S Blackjack ‘RF-94113 / 19 red’ ‘Valentin Bilznyuk’” by Alan Wilson under CC BY-SA 2.0.

that are absent in other parts of the world. According to the 2018 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, an average of just 47 percent of the populations of seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela) have a favorable opinion of the United States. The figure is highest in Peru (51 percent), Colombia (51 percent), and Brazil (50 percent). It is lowest in Mexico (30 percent).<sup>18</sup>

U.S. proximity to the region, dislike of Maduro's regime by Venezuela's neighbors, and a degree of goodwill toward the United States also provide Washington with some built-in advantages. As recently as 2015, for example, the United States was viewed favorably by 66 percent of the populations in those same seven Latin American countries, according to Pew, suggesting a strong reservoir of potential support.

Given this complex reality, U.S. leaders can respond to Russian propaganda about Venezuela in four ways:

④ **KNOW THE TERRITORY:** Any counter-propaganda or strategic communications effort in Latin America needs to begin with understanding U.S. vulnerabilities and strengths in the region. This means forming an accurate picture of the information and attitudinal landscape through extensive public opinion research, including polling and focus groups, to determine the degree to which Russian-backed narratives are succeeding. To what extent does the public believe that U.S. policy in Venezuela is the latest manifestation of "Yankee imperialism?" To what degree do Latin Americans think the United States is trying to steal Venezuela's oil?

④ **TELL OUR STORY WELL – AND TELL IT LOUDLY:** Regardless of what happened in

the past, what is important today is what is happening in Venezuela in 2019. There, the United States is clearly on the side of the people in their opposition to a corrupt and brutal dictator.

The United States should turn Moscow's narrative about U.S. support for "color revolutions" in places like Georgia and Ukraine on its head. Like Venezuela, Georgia and Ukraine experienced genuine, massive, and organic popular uprisings against corrupt, unpopular, Moscow-backed regimes. As in Venezuela, the United States was on the side of the people. As a result, the Georgian

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**“Washington should work closely with allies to craft a powerful and coordinated message.”**

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and Ukrainian people remain deeply grateful for American support. Get Georgians and Ukrainians to tell that story to the people of Latin America!

④ **STRESS RUSSIA'S MALIGN ROLE:** U.S. strategic communications in Latin America should stress that the Kremlin has no interest

in fostering democracy or the wellbeing of the region's people, a fact illustrated by the fates of other nations that have been "saved" or "liberated" by Russian intervention. Likewise, U.S. messaging should stress the fact that Moscow's point man in Venezuela is the CEO of Russia's state-run oil company which is in the process of gobbling up the country's energy assets. This energy relationship speaks volumes about the Putin regime's true intentions.

⊕ **USE SURROGATES EFFECTIVELY:** With the vast majority of Latin American governments agreeing with Washington's position on Venezuela, there should be no shortage of regional surrogates to amplify the U.S. message. Likewise, with most European Union members backing the U.S. position— including

Germany, France, and the United Kingdom— Washington should work closely with the allies to craft a powerful and coordinated message. Moreover, there are more than 400,000 Venezuelan Americans—including actors, actresses, artists, sports figures, and entrepreneurs. The United States can enlist them in the campaign as well.

Should Maduro yield to the will of the majority of the Venezuelan people and depart the scene, Russia probably would use its weapons of influence, including information warfare, to protect its oil interests and undermine Venezuelan democracy. This threat, and the need to help repair the damage inflicted on the country during the Chavez/Maduro years, require sustained commitment by the United States.

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