



**MEMORANDUM**

July 15, 2022

**To:** House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy  
Attention: Max Price

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**Subject:** **Background and Questions for Hearing on Russia’s Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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The following memorandum responds to your request for background information and potential questions for an upcoming hearing entitled “Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin’s Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.” Material in this memorandum may be used in other CRS products.

**Overview**

For over a decade, Russia has increased its engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, although this engagement has been relatively limited compared to China’s activities or long-standing U.S. partnerships in the region. Russia’s regional engagement largely has focused on commercial military sales, investment in energy projects, and periodic visits by Russian military ships and aircraft for what Russian officials characterize as training exercises. In recent years, U.S. government and independent analysts have implicated Russian entities in disinformation operations targeting Latin America. Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua are Russia’s main security partners in the region.

Russia’s intentions in the Western Hemisphere remain a concern to U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress, especially in the context of Russia’s renewed war in Ukraine in 2022. In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, a provision in the House-passed National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, H.R. 7900 (H.Rept. 117-397, Division A), would require a report on Russia’s efforts to expand its presence and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Background on Russian Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean**

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union provided extensive economic and military support to Cuba as well as to Nicaragua in the aftermath of the latter’s 1979 *Sandinista* revolution. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian engagement with the region declined significantly. As U.S.-Russian relations gradually became more tense, however, Russia resuscitated relations with former Cold War allies Cuba and Nicaragua and also expanded relations with other countries that have had antagonistic relations with

the United States, especially Venezuela, beginning in the mid-2000s. For many observers, one of Russia's objectives in the region is to assert its ability to operate in the U.S. "backyard" as a way to counter a U.S. presence in countries near Russia.<sup>1</sup>

**Trade and Investment.**<sup>2</sup> Russia's trade and investment relations with Latin America and the Caribbean are limited. Total Russian trade with the region was valued at \$20.6 billion in 2021, accounting for 2.6% of Russia's global trade. For most Latin American and Caribbean countries, trade with Russia was less than 1% of their global trade. Russian exports to the region in 2021 were valued at almost \$12 billion (38% fertilizers, 27% iron and steel, and 19% petroleum and coal). Russian imports were valued at \$8.6 billion (20% fruit, 16% soybeans and peanuts, and 10% meat). Approximately three-quarters of Russia's regional trade in 2021 was with four countries: Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina. Although the value of Russia's trade with the region is low, some countries depend on imports for fertilizers, the leading Russian export to the region; more than 20% of Brazil's and Mexico's fertilizer imports are from Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of investment, Russia's investment in the region reportedly is modest and pales in comparison to investment by the United States, European Union countries, Canada, China, and Japan.<sup>4</sup> Russian companies in the region have largely focused on the energy sector and to a lesser extent on mining. Russian energy companies have oil and gas investments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, and Mexico as well as projects in Ecuador, Colombia, and Cuba. Other investments have included a nuclear industry project in Bolivia, gold mining in Venezuela, bauxite mining operations in Guyana and Jamaica, and transport and infrastructure projects in Cuba.<sup>5</sup>

**Arms Sales.** Since 2018, the arms transfers database maintained by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has recorded no publicly announced deliveries of Russian arms and military equipment to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. This in part may be due to U.S. sanctions introduced in 2017 that target "significant transactions" with Russia's military and intelligence sectors, including arms sales.<sup>6</sup> From 2014-2017, Russian regional arms sales reportedly were limited. According to SIPRI, from 2014 to 2017, Russia delivered arms and military equipment with an estimated value of \$407 million to four countries in Latin America: Peru (\$162 million), Nicaragua (\$121 million), Venezuela (\$79 million), and Brazil (\$45 million).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Russian arms deliveries to the region were higher from 2006 to 2013, mainly due to Venezuela's purchase of several billions of dollars' worth of Russian arms and military equipment.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, R. Evan Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past," U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2015; Vladimir Rouvinski, "Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America," *Kennan Cable*, Wilson Center, February 3, 2017; and Fabiana S. Perera, "Russia and Latin America: Flexible, Pragmatic, and Close," in Graeme P. Herd, ed., *Russia's Global Reach, A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Trade statistics are from Federal Customs Service of Russia, as presented by Trade Data Monitor.

<sup>3</sup> Trade statistics from Brazil and Mexico, as presented by Trade Data Monitor.

<sup>4</sup> Andrey Pyatakov, "Russia and Latin America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, A Difficult Rapprochement," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 119, French Institute of International Relations (IFRE), July 2020. Also see U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean*, August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Evan Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return to Latin America," *Global Americans*, January 19, 2022; Leksytina Yana, "Russia's Economic Outreach in Latin America," Center for the Study of Global Economic Future (CSGEF), August 23, 2021; and Andrey Pyatakov, "Russia and Latin America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, A Difficult Rapprochement," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 119, IFRE, July 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Section 232 of the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017, as amended (P.L. 115-44, Title II; 22 U.S.C. 9525).

<sup>7</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 14, 2022, available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

**Propaganda and Disinformation.** For more than a decade, the Russian government has used Russia Today (RT *Actualidad*, online and television) and Sputnik *Mundo* (online and radio) as primary vehicles for its information strategy targeting Spanish-speaking populations in the United States and in Latin America and the Caribbean. Observers maintain that the media outlets are used to cast doubts about the United States and the policies of its regional allies, question democracy, and characterize authoritarian regimes as more suitable for resolving societal problems.<sup>8</sup> According to one analysis, Russia's disinformation operations in the region are focused on disrupting social order and political stability on a national level, and also seek to gain support from those already wary of the United States in the hope of expanding Russian political influence.<sup>9</sup> Some observers have also raised concerns about Russia's potential interference in elections in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Ahead of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia unleashed a wave of Spanish-language disinformation in Latin America about the Ukraine conflict through such outlets as RT and Sputnik. Russian President Vladimir Putin also intensified his diplomatic outreach to the region, including calls to the leaders of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and hosted visits to Russia by the presidents of Argentina and Brazil.<sup>11</sup>

## U.S. Views

U.S. intelligence and military officials have expressed concern about Russian security-related and disinformation activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. For example,

- A 2019 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report to Congress on security cooperation between Russia and Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela described these three countries as Russia's primary security partners in Latin America and the Caribbean, with defense cooperation focused on equipment sales, maintenance support, training, naval and air deployments, and probably intelligence cooperation. The report characterized Russia's rationale for engagement in the region as pursuing economic opportunities and challenging the United States in its historical sphere of influence, although it concluded that beyond these three countries, Russia has achieved only marginal successes in the region.<sup>12</sup>
- The U.S. intelligence community's 2022 annual threat assessment states that Russia has "expanded its engagement with Venezuela, supported Cuba, and used arms sales and energy agreements to try to expand access to markets and natural resources in Latin

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean," Florida International University, FIU Digital Commons, October 2021. Also see U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, January 2022.

<sup>9</sup> "Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America," *Global Americans*, November 18, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, "Russian Influence in Mexican and Colombian Elections," German Marshall Fund, January 4, 2018; and Julia Gurganus, *Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> "Russia Has Been Showing Diplomatic Interest in Latin American Countries," *NPR, Weekend Edition*, February 20, 2022; Jack Nicas and Anton Troianovski, "A World Away From Ukraine, Russia Is Courting Latin America," *New York Times*, February 15, 2022; and Jack Detsch, "Russia Has Taken Over Spanish-Language Airwaves on Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Russia: Defense Cooperation with Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela*, February 4, 2019, report to Congress required by the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY2019, P.L. 115-232 (hereinafter "DIA report, February 4, 2019").

America, in part to offset some of the effects of sanctions.”<sup>13</sup> DIA’s statement for the record on the agency’s worldwide threat assessment for 2022 maintains that “in Latin America, Moscow is focused largely on strengthening military ties with its traditional partners Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, offering training, arms sales, and weapons maintenance support.” The statement asserts that Russia “threatened to increase its military presence in the region in response to U.S. support in Ukraine.” It also assesses that “Russian engagement with other Latin American governments remains minimal.”<sup>14</sup>

- In its 2022 posture statement issued in March, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) maintains that Russia is among the secondary external threats in the region, with China being the primary threat. According to SOUTHCOM, Russia “intensifies instability through its ties with Venezuela, entrenchment in Cuba and Nicaragua, and extensive disinformation operations.” SOUTHCOM reports that Russia, through its key regional partners (Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua) has expanded its air and sea access to project military power throughout the region. Russia reportedly doubled its naval deployments in the region from five between 2008-2014 to eleven between 2015-2020, and has provided security training through \$2.3 billion in weapons and military equipment sales over the past decade.<sup>15</sup>
- In January 2022, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that he could “not confirm nor exclude” the possibility of sending military assets to Latin America if the United States and its allies do not curtail their actions on Russia’s doorstep.<sup>16</sup> U.S. officials characterized this as “bluster,” but also stated, “If we do see any movement in that direction, we will respond swiftly and decisively.”<sup>17</sup>

## Regional Response and Reactions to the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Most Latin America and Caribbean countries supported the U.N. General Assembly’s (UNGA) March 2, 2022, resolution deploring Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and a second UNGA resolution adopted March 24 deploring the dire humanitarian consequences caused by Russia’s hostilities against Ukraine. Four countries in the region abstained—Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—while Venezuela could not vote because it is in arrears in its dues to the United Nations.<sup>18</sup> In a subsequent vote on April 7, the UNGA suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council because of human rights violations in Ukraine. Among Latin America and Caribbean countries, three voted against the measure—Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua—and the number of abstentions in the region grew to 10, including Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, and 7 Caribbean countries—Barbados, Belize, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, February 2022.

<sup>14</sup> DIA, Statement for the Record, *Worldwide Threat Assessment 2022*, House Armed Services Committee, March 2022.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), *SOUTHCOM Posture Statement 2022*, March 8, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov and Matthew Lee, “Russia’s Talk of Troops in Latin America Called ‘Bluster,’” AP News, January 13, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of State, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, “Department Press Briefing,” January 27, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), “Aggression Against Ukraine,” A/RES/ES-11/1, adopted March 3, 2022, and “Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression Against Ukraine,” A/RES/ES-11/2, adopted March 24, 2022, United Nations Digital Library; and UNGA, “Countries in arrears in the payment of their financial contributions under the terms of Article 19 of the UN Charter,” January 31, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> “UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council,” *UN News*, April 7, 2022.

Likewise at the Organization of American States (OAS), most Latin American and Caribbean countries supported a March 25, 2022, Permanent Council resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Five countries abstained, including Brazil, as well as Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In a subsequent April 21 vote, the Permanent Council suspended Russia's status as a permanent observer to the OAS. The list of abstaining countries grew to eight to include Argentina, Mexico, and St. Kitts and Nevis.<sup>20</sup>

These U.N. and OAS votes demonstrated the limits of Russia's influence in the region, despite its overtures and disinformation strategy in recent years. With few exceptions, Latin American and Caribbean countries condemned Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While some countries abstained on votes of whether to suspend Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council and/or as an observer to the OAS, these countries did not vote in favor of Russia by opposing the resolutions. As one observer remarked, "the war in Ukraine exposed the shallowness of Russia's regional ties."<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their countries' U.N. votes condemning Russia, some regional leaders have been reluctant to publicly criticize the Russian government over Ukraine. These include Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has criticized the United States and NATO for supplying weapons to Ukraine, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who expressed solidarity with Russia in a February 2022 trip to Moscow before Russia attacked Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> According to some observers, such reluctance to criticize Russia may be the result of some states seeking to balance U.S. power and influence in the hemisphere by maintaining relations with U.S. adversaries.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, while condemning Russia for the invasion, most Latin American and Caribbean countries generally are reluctant to impose sanctions, which is consistent with a regional approach that tends to favor diplomatic negotiations conducted under the principle of nonintervention.<sup>24</sup> Argentina and Brazil have spoken out against sanctions because of concerns about the global economy, while Mexico's president has emphasized his country's neutrality and support for dialogue.<sup>25</sup> Given Russia's limited trade and investment relations with the region described above, economic sanctions imposed by Latin American and Caribbean countries would likely have little impact on Russia.

Concerns are growing, however, in Latin America and the Caribbean about the economic impact of the invasion on regional economies.<sup>26</sup> A June 2022 report by the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean forecast a significant slowdown in economic growth for the region, from 6.3% growth in 2021 to 1.8% growth in 2022. Higher global prices for energy (oil, gas, and coal), food,

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, "OAS Resolution Condemns Russia's Continued War Against Ukraine," March 25, 2022, and "OAS Suspends Russia's Status as Permanent Observer," April 21, 2022. Nicaragua was absent from both votes, and announced in late April 2022 that it had left the OAS.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin N. Gedan, "Latin America's New Crop of Leftist Leaders are No Friends of Putin," *World Politics Review*, March 29, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Associated Press, "Mexican President Slams NATO's Policy on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Calls it 'Immoral,'" June 13, 2022; and Igor Gielow, "Bolsonaro: We are in Solidarity with Russia," *Folha de São Paulo*, February 17, 2022. Also see CRS Report R46236, *Brazil: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Peter J. Meyer.

<sup>23</sup> "Why so much of the world won't stand up to Russia," *The Economist*, April 16, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> J. Luis Rodriguez, "Explaining Latin America's Contradictory Reactions to the War in Ukraine," *War on the Rocks*, April 27, 2022; and Dr. José Ignacio Hernández G., "Fighting Against Imperialism: The Latin American Approach to International Sanctions," Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs, Center on Global Energy Policy, September 2, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> "President Fernández Questions Economic Sanctions Against Russia," *Buenos Aires Times*, May 5, 2022; Marcela Ayres, "Brazil's Guedes Condemns War in Ukraine, But Is Against Economic Sanctions on Russia," Reuters, April 19, 2022; and "Mexico's President Not Planning Sanctions on Russia for War with Ukraine," Reuters, May 4, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> James Bosworth, "The War in Ukraine Is a Ticking Timebomb for Latin America," *World Politics Review*, June 13, 2022.

and fertilizers are fueling inflation in the region, and along with slower growth, will likely increase poverty to levels higher than recorded during the first year of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Some countries in the region that import fertilizers from Russia have been affected by higher prices and a scarcity of global supply.<sup>27</sup>

## Russia's Closest Regional Partners

### *Cuba*

Russia's relations with Cuba, which had diminished significantly in the aftermath of the Cold War, have strengthened in recent years. Prior to a 2014 trip to Cuba, Russian President Putin signed into law an agreement writing off around 90% of Cuba's \$32 billion Soviet-era debt, with the remainder to be paid in a way that funds Russian investment projects in Cuba. In February 2022, ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia agreed to postpone Cuba's remaining debt payments for some \$2.3 billion until 2027.<sup>28</sup> Also in February 2022, following a visit from Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov, Cuba's foreign ministry said Russia and Cuba would deepen ties and explore collaboration in transportation, energy, industry, and banking.<sup>29</sup> Cuba abstained in the March 2022 UNGA vote condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, although the government has adopted the Russian narrative on the war and sought to discredit Western reporting on the invasion.<sup>30</sup>

Cuba was a major recipient of Soviet arms during the Cold War, but Cuban purchases of Russian arms and equipment since the 1990s have been minimal. SIPRI has not reported any Russian arms deliveries to Cuba in recent years. The 2019 DIA report stated that bilateral arms cooperation "has included contracts for air-to-air missiles, radar upgrades, spare parts, and equipment to produce and recycle ammunition."<sup>31</sup> In February 2019, Russia finalized a loan to Cuba (worth around \$43 million) to purchase Russian military equipment, potentially including tanks, armored vehicles, and helicopters.<sup>32</sup>

Russia and Cuba have pursued other measures of military cooperation. According to the 2019 DIA report, the Russian Navy has used Cuban ports for maintenance, minor repairs, and refueling, based on a 2013 agreement.<sup>33</sup> In 2016, Russia and Cuba signed a military cooperation agreement providing Russian support for modernizing Cuba's defense sector through 2020.<sup>34</sup> In March 2018, a Russian intelligence ship docked in Havana (reportedly the fourth such visit since 2014), and in June 2019, a Russian warship docked in Havana.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Repercussions in Latin America and the Caribbean of the War in Ukraine: How Should the Region Face this New Crisis?* June 6, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Andrianova and Bill Faries, "Russia Forgives \$32B of Debt, Wants to Do Business in Cuba," Bloomberg News, July 13, 2014; and Polina Devitt and Dave Sherwood, "Russia Postpones Debt Payments Amid Warming Relations," Reuters, February 22, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Dave Sherwood, "Cuba to Deepen Ties with Russia as Ukraine Tensions Mount," Reuters, February 19, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Graham Keeley, "Cuba Adopts Russian Narrative on Ukraine War," VOA, April 7, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> DIA report, February 4, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Reuters, "Russia Approves 38 Million Euro Loan to Cuba's Military," February 6, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> DIA report, February 4, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia to Help Cuba Upgrade Armed Forces," TASS World Service Wire, December 15, 2016; "Russia, Cuba Sign Program on Defense Technology Cooperation," Sputnik News Service, December 8, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "Russian Spy Ship Is Docked in Havana Harbor," *Miami Herald*, March 16, 2018; DIA report, February 4, 2019; and "What's an Advanced Russian Warship Doing in Havana Harbor?" *PBS NewsHour*, June 24, 2019.

## Nicaragua

Observers note that Russia's security cooperation with Nicaragua has strengthened since Daniel Ortega, the head of Nicaragua's Soviet-backed Sandinista government (1979-1990), returned to power in 2007. During this time, Russia has been Nicaragua's main supplier of military arms and equipment. Nicaragua reportedly has purchased or received from Russia military helicopters and aircraft, T-72 tanks and other ground vehicles, naval vessels, and anti-aircraft artillery.<sup>36</sup>

The 2019 DIA report to Congress asserted that under Ortega, Nicaragua-Russia security and defense cooperation has strengthened through security agreements, military exercises, and training. The report noted that Nicaragua allowed Russia to conduct naval exercises in its territorial waters in 2008, and granted Russian military vessels port access in 2015. Russia also established a counterdrug training facility in Nicaragua in 2017, which the DIA report and other observers maintain could be used for intelligence collection activities.<sup>37</sup> Russia also opened a "GLONASS" (Russia's global navigation satellite system) ground station in Nicaragua in 2017, which some observers believe could serve as a way to gather intelligence.<sup>38</sup> In U.S. legislation enacted in November 2021, Congress required the State Department to prepare, in coordination with the Director of National Intelligence, a classified report to Congress on the activities of Russia in Nicaragua.<sup>39</sup>

In mid-June 2022, Nicaragua's National Assembly renewed a decree that reportedly has been approved biannually over the past decade to allow certain foreign military personnel, including those of Russia, into the country to participate in training exercises and humanitarian operations. Some analysts posit that Russian media's coverage of the routine reauthorization was aimed at spreading propaganda about Russia's presence and support to Nicaragua.<sup>40</sup>

## Venezuela

Since the mid-2000s, Russia has expanded relations with Venezuela. The two countries have reportedly signed some 260 agreements on issues ranging from military operations to energy cooperation and their leaders meet regularly to review bilateral cooperation.<sup>41</sup> Russia has remained the Nicolás Maduro government's primary political and military backer even though Venezuela's economic collapse since 2014 has made the country unable to purchase the type of weaponry bought under President Hugo Chávez

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<sup>36</sup> Julia Gurganus, *Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018; Sergey Sukhankin, "Will Nicaragua Become Russia's 'Cuba of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, August 7, 2018; DIA report, February 4, 2019; Evan Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return to Latin America," *Global Americans*, January 19, 2022; and SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 14, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> DIA report, February 4, 2019; and Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, "Russia Opens Police Training Center in Nicaragua," *Confidencial*, October 25, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> DIA report, February 4, 2019; Joshua Partlow, "The Soviet Union Fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin's Russia Is Back," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2017; Evan Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America: An Update," CSIS, December 19, 2017; and Armando Chaguaceda, "Russia and Nicaragua: Progress in Bilateral Cooperation," *Global Americans*, March 28, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> The report, required by the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021, or RENACER Act (P.L. 117-54, Section 9), is to include information on cooperation between Russian and Nicaraguan military personnel, intelligence services, security forces, law enforcement, and private Russian security contractors; cooperation related to telecommunications and satellite navigation; other political and economic information, including banking, disinformation, and election interference; and the threats and risks that such activities pose to U.S. national interests and national security.

<sup>40</sup> Ismael Lopez, "Nicaragua Congress Renews Russian Training Exercise Approval," Reuters, June 14, 2022; "Nicaragua: Government Ratified Presence of Foreign Militaries," Stratfor, June 15, 2022; and Carlos Salinas Maldonado, "Nicaragua's Ortega Strains U.S. Relations by Expanding Military Ties with Russia," *El País*, June 13, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Tony Frangie Mawad, "Venezuela is Just one More Card in Russia's Geopolitical Game," *Caracas Chronicles*, March 4, 2022.

(1999-2013). In return, Venezuela has supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine even as sanctions on Russian banks have prevented the Maduro government's ability to access currency in Russian accounts.<sup>42</sup>

The 2019 DIA report estimated around \$11 billion in Russian defense sales to Venezuela from 2001-2013. Arms purchases included fighter aircraft, attack and transport helicopters, air defense and naval platforms, tanks, armored personnel vehicles, self-propelled artillery, and small arms.<sup>43</sup> In December 2018, Russia deployed two nuclear capable bombers to Venezuela (the third such deployment since 2008), demonstrating support for the Maduro government.<sup>44</sup>

Under Maduro, Venezuela has sought to extend the life expectancy of its Russian-supplied equipment via refurbishment and service contracts and received Russian technical assistance and training. In March 2019, Russia deployed military personnel to Venezuela, which it argued was for maintenance of Russian-made military equipment but also served as a signal of support for the Maduro government.<sup>45</sup> In April 2019, the Russian government announced that it had completed construction of a training center for Venezuelan pilots of Russian-made military helicopters.<sup>46</sup> In 2019, Maduro also reportedly relied on Russian-linked contractors to bolster his personal security.<sup>47</sup> After reports emerged that Russian military advisors embedded with Venezuelan military units were operating at or near the Venezuela-Colombia border, Russian officials dismissed Colombian assertions of "foreign interference" in support of Venezuelan and allied illegally armed groups in the border area.<sup>48</sup>

Russia has both economic and geostrategic interests in Venezuela, but Russia, like China, has not provided new financing to back the Maduro government in several years.<sup>49</sup> Russia's Rosneft oil company invested some \$9 billion to support Venezuela's struggling oil industry and initially helped Venezuela evade U.S. oil sanctions imposed in 2019 by transporting the majority of Venezuela's oil deliveries, partially as a way of collecting on the debt it was owed.<sup>50</sup> In response, the Treasury Department sanctioned two subsidiaries of Russia's Rosneft oil company in 2020 and Rosneft sold its assets in Venezuela to Roszarubezhneft, a lesser-known Russian state company.<sup>51</sup> While Russia's footprint in Venezuela's energy sector may have somewhat diminished, the State Department maintains that Russia has continued to use Venezuela as a platform from which to spread propaganda, disinformation, and Russian-related media.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Sanctions Against Russia to Also Hurt its Latin American Allies," *Miami Herald*, March 1, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> DIA report, February 4, 2019; and TASS Russian News Agency, "Russian Weaponry Selling Best in Latin America," March 30, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Phillips, "Venezuela Welcomes Russian Bombers in Show of Support for Maduro," *Guardian*, December 10, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Balmforth and Maxim Rodionov, "Russia Says It Sent 'Specialists' to Venezuela, Rebuffs Trump," Reuters, March 28, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> "Russia Says It Has Opened Helicopter Training Centre in Venezuela," Reuters, April 2, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Roth, "Russian Mercenaries Reportedly in Venezuela to Protect Maduro," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Tony Frangie Mawad, "Venezuela is Just one More Card in Russia's Geopolitical Game," *Caracas Chronicles*, March 4, 2022; and "Russia Rejects Colombian 'Foreign Interference' Claims," AFP, April 2, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Kristen Martinez-Gugerli, "Taking Stock of Chinese and Russian Relations with Venezuela," Washington Office on Latin America, August 10, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Rouvinski, *Russia's Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond-An Update*, Woodrow Wilson Center, February 18, 2020; Christian Lowe and Rinat Sagdiev, "How Russia Sank Billions of Dollars into Venezuelan Quicksand," Reuters, March 14, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Russia's Gazprom and Lukoil also are no longer invested in Venezuela. Fabiola Zerpa and Ezra Fieser, "Russian Oil Rigs in Venezuela Complicate Talks with Maduro," *Bloomberg Government*, March 11, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, August 2020.



## Potential Questions

- Do you think Russian President Putin aims to increase Russian engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and if so, how? Some observers maintain that Russian government may not have the resources to increase assistance to, or economic engagement with, the region, particularly as it confronts Western economic sanctions. What is your view of that assessment?
- In your view, does the current level of Russia's cooperation with its three main security partners in the region—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—pose a threat to regional security and/or U.S. interests, and if so, how specifically? How do Russia's security relationships in the region today differ from its relationships during the Cold War? How would you characterize Russia's military intentions in Latin America and the Caribbean?
- To what extent has Russia's use of RT and Sputnik media outlets as propaganda tools in the region affected the views of Latin American and Caribbean populations about the United States or U.S. policy? Could you provide some specific examples of how Russia's use of disinformation in the region has sought to affect political stability in some countries? To what extent does Russian disinformation contribute to declining public satisfaction with democracy in the region? What recommendations do you have for how the United States can best counter Russia's propaganda and disinformation strategy in the region?
- To what extent has Russia's 2022 military invasion of Ukraine affected public perceptions of Russia in Latin American and Caribbean countries? Looking ahead, could Russia's actions affect the willingness of some regional governments to engage with Russia bilaterally? How might Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and expanded Western sanctions on Russia affect Russian-Venezuelan relations? Do you see the invasion as having any effect on Russia's relations with the region's largest countries—Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina?
- Even though most countries in the region voted to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations, some Latin American leaders, such as the Brazilian and Mexican presidents, have been reluctant to criticize publicly Russia or President Putin. What accounts for this reluctance? Please explain why most Latin America and Caribbean countries are opposed to the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia.
- While Mexico has voted for U.N. resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mexican President López Obrador has criticized U.S. and NATO military support of Ukraine, and his political party and its allies formed a congressional friendship caucus with Russia. In March 2022, General Glen VanHerck, Commander of U.S. Northern Command, testified before the Senate that Mexico is among the top countries worldwide with regard to the number of Russian spies operating in its territory.<sup>53</sup> To what extent, if any, could these developments affect U.S.-Mexican relations? How does the Mexican public view Russia in light of its invasion of Ukraine?
- How would you characterize Brazil's policy response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine? To what extent is Brazil's policy stance toward Russia driven by concerns about the negative effects of sanctions on Brazil's economy? To what extent is Brazil's stance driven by other geopolitical considerations, such as potential Russian assistance in the development of a nuclear-powered submarine?<sup>54</sup> How does the Brazilian public view Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine

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<sup>53</sup> "Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on U.S. Northern and Southern Command," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 24, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> "U.S. Refusal Made Bolsonaro Ask Putin for Help with Nuclear Submarine," *Folha de São Paulo*, March 17, 2022.

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invasion? To what extent, if any, has Brazil's policy stance toward Russia become an issue in the country's presidential elections scheduled for October?

- While Russia promised significant sales of its Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccines to several Latin American countries, it was unable to fulfill contracts because of manufacturing problems. How did Latin American countries react to the delivery delays? How would you assess Russia's COVID-19 diplomacy efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean?
  - In Venezuela, how has Russia's security and economic relationship evolved from the government of Hugo Chávez to the government of Nicolás Maduro? To what extent, if at all, has Russia's military involvement in Venezuela deepened, lessened, or stayed the same over time?
  - Have you seen any evidence supporting the assertion that Russian defense articles have come under the control of illegally armed groups in Venezuela (and Colombia)? If so, what can be done to prevent potential future illicit weapons flows?
  - Do Russian-Venezuelan ties have any ostensible effect on efforts to reach a negotiated solution to Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis?
  - How would you assess Cuba's relations with Russia after the 2022 Ukraine invasion and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia? Given the state of the Russian economy, does Russia have the ability to increase its support for, or economic engagement with, the Cuban regime?
  - How do you assess prospects for increased Russian engagement with Nicaragua? In particular, how do you view Nicaragua's recent reauthorization allowing Russia to continue to provide training in the country? What more can you tell us about the training that Russia provides to Nicaragua and the role of the counterdrug training facility?
  - Bolivia, which abstained from the U.N. votes condemning Russia for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has had Russian support for the development of a nuclear research facility. In addition, a Russian company is competing for a concession to help Bolivia develop its significant lithium reserves (a U.S. company is also in the running). How would you characterize Russia's current level of engagement with Bolivia? What would be your primary concern if Russia were to become a dominant investor in a strategic sector such as lithium? Do you have any recommendations for U.S. policy toward Bolivia that might improve bilateral relations and counter Russia's influence in the country?
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