

Russia and Latin America: Opacities, Asymmetries, and Dangers

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The latest Russian foreign policy document regarding Latin America and the Caribbean outlines a commitment to developing relationships “in a pragmatic, non-ideological, and mutually beneficial manner”. Despite this apparent emphasis on pragmatism, the document prioritizes supporting “Latin American states [...] under pressure from the United States and its allies in safeguarding their sovereignty and independence, including cooperation in security, military, and military-technical areas”¹ [Own translation].

As the context for these documents suggests, Russia’s priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean have taken on a more geopolitical dimension as internal and external pressures on Vladimir Putin’s agenda have increased.

In Latin America, there is a notable lack of consensus regarding relations with Russia, as evidenced by differing stances on the war in Ukraine and, more recently, the backlash from ten members of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) against their president pro

¹ The Russian Federation’s foreign policy (31.03.2023), available in: [https:// mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/)

tempore's unsolicited congratulations to Vladimir Putin on his fifth re-election. The absence of a unified stance underscores the significant vulnerabilities within the region, particularly given Russia's evolving approach, which employs a range of power tactics to exert social and political influence and encourages the autocratization of the international order².

This backdrop frames the focus of this analysis: the opacity of Russian geopolitics, the asymmetry in its relationships with Latin America, and the associated risks for the region.

Geopolitics and opacity

When comparing the challenges to the world order posed by Vladimir Putin's regime with those of the Soviet era during the Cold War, there are notable similarities, but also key differences.

During the East-West polarization of the Cold War, the Soviet regime viewed Latin America as a fertile ground for promoting communist ideology, challenging U.S. dominance, strengthening the USSR's international influence, and gaining support within the United Nations³. Moscow's toolkit included propaganda, connections between communist parties, diplomacy, trade, espionage, and covert operations conducted by the Committee for State Security (KGB). In Latin America,

2 Elsa Cardozo, "La autocratización del orden internacional: desafío para los demócratas y las democracias", *Democratización* 3, no. 8 (marzo 2021): 22-46, disponible en: <https://red-forma.com/revista-democratizacion/>

3 Cole Blasier, "Soviet Impacts on Latin America," *Russian History* (vol. 29, no. 2/4, summer, fall, winter 2002), pp. 481-97, available in, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24660798>

the Soviet Union's engagement began with moderate support for the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944, which evolved into the Cuban Revolution's affiliation with the Soviet bloc three decades later. With substantial economic and military aid sustained over thirty years, the Caribbean island, situated in the United States' immediate neighborhood, became a platform for supporting armed insurgencies against democratic regimes, interfering in democratic reconstruction processes, and encouraging the radicalization of democratically elected left-wing governments.

After the hiatus caused by the collapse of the USSR, Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov's visits to Latin America between 1996 and 1997 marked the region's inclusion in Russia's new international strategy. Three years later, under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia's ambitions to regain geopolitical influence found fertile ground. In this context, the opening provided by Hugo Chávez's government in 2001 became a significant regional development⁴. During Latin America's *marea rosa* (pink tide), the Chávez government facilitated closer ties with Russia, demonstrating political affinity through investments, donations, general trade, arms purchases, and secret military agreements. These activities were

4 Vladimir Rovinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads", Wilson Center (February, 2019), available in: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/russia-venezuela_report_rouvinski_final.pdf

shrouded in significant opacity, often concealing non-compliance and corruption⁵.

Russia's interests extended beyond Venezuela and projected far abroad. Russia's resurgence in Latin America involved both state-owned enterprises and private companies with close ties to the Kremlin, particularly in the arms sector. During the commodities boom years, Russia became the largest military supplier in the region, though these sales declined after 2014 and nearly ceased altogether after 2017. Trade, though generally insignificant, was also affected by this downturn, with further discouragement due to sanctions imposed following the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and intensifying in 2022 due to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Despite this overall reduction in trade, Russia's exports —particularly strategic commodities like fertilizers— remained relatively stable, while its main Latin American markets such as Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Mexico saw a more noticeable decline.

Another sector of Russian interest in Latin America is energy, with Russian companies active in Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico, as well as in electricity generation projects in other countries. This interest aligns with Russia's ambition to become a major global player in the energy sector, influencing oil market management and participating in OPEC *Plus* quota decisions. To navigate sanctions, Russia has also developed

5 Transparencia Venezuela, *Acuerdos con Rusia. Alianza Geopolítica* (August 2022), available in: <https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Acuerdos-con-Rusia-alianza-geopolitica.pdf>

mechanisms to evade restrictions on its own exports and to handle Venezuelan oil, operating in a business environment known for its opacity.

With the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, which has significantly limited its international reach, Moscow's Latin American agenda has taken on a more pronounced geopolitical focus. However, this focus has shifted to a more asymmetrical and opaque approach compared to the Cold War era, due to its different objectives and methods.

This trend is reflected in the intensification of what is called "symbolic reciprocity"⁶, which has recently taken on the tone of a sort of Russian payback for NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and a challenge to the United States in its own backyard. High-level visits, technical cooperation, humanitarian aid, student exchanges, and vaccine diplomacy have all been components of Russia's regional soft power strategy. However, after two years of war, Russia finds itself with fewer material resources and diminished legitimacy due to its increasingly aggressive domestic and international policies. Despite these constraints, Russia continues to exploit dissatisfaction and mistrust toward the United States while cultivating a deliberately skewed view of its own regime among certain Latin American governments and political parties. This strategy

6 Vladimir Rouvinski, "El 'retorno' ruso: cinco claves para entender las relaciones de la Rusia postsoviética con América Latina y el Caribe", Fundación Carolina, *Documentos de Trabajo* 36 (2020), available in: <https://www.fundacioncarolina.es/catalogo/catalogo-el-retorno-ruso-cinco-claves-para-entender-las-relaciones-de-la-rusia-postsovietica-con-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>

unfolds amidst significant opacity, employing diplomatic visits, speeches, joint statements, and, most notably, the strategic use of communication⁷. Russia's sharp power approach involves disinformation and influence campaigns targeting local actors and political decisions, aiming to erode democratic consensus and prop up sympathetic regimes⁸.

Fragmentation and asymmetry

Following Vladimir Putin's ostensibly fraudulent re-election, a limited number of Latin American governments quickly extended their congratulations, including Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, along with Bolivia and Honduras. Other regional governments may have opted for a more discreet approach, while some remained silent. Tensions rose when ten Latin American leaders protested Xiomara Castro's congratulatory message to Putin⁹, objecting to the fact that the President of Honduras not only spoke on behalf of her country but also, expressly, in her capacity as the Pro Tempore

7 Johanna Cilano Pelaez & María Isabel Puerta, "Así nos habla el Kremlin. Narrativa política y medios de comunicación rusos en América Latina", *DP Enfoque* (no. 10, 2022), Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, available in: <https://dialogopolitico.org/documentos/dp-enfoque/dp-enfoque-10-kremlin/>

8 Claudia González Marrero & Armando Chaguaceda, "El poder de Rusia en Latinoamérica Autocracia global, influencia regional", *DP Enfoque* 7 (2022), Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, available in: <https://dialogopolitico.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/El-poder-de-Rusia-en-Latinoamerica.pdf>

9 Joint Communiqué of the National Coordinators on demonstrations representing CELAC (19.03.2024), available in: <https://www.rree.go.cr/?sec=servicios&cat=prensa&cont=593&id=7668>

President of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The backlash from these ten governments was swift. They pointed out that, like other positions taken by Castro on behalf of CELAC, this congratulatory gesture was not agreed upon among the forum's member states. Meanwhile, other governments, such as Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and El Salvador, refrained from joining the protest. This varied response not only illustrates the diverse attitudes toward the Russian regime but also highlights the regional divergences in balancing convictions with strategic interests, a dynamic that has been particularly evident in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Russia has exploited this landscape of divergence in Latin America to further the international ambitions of Vladimir Putin's government, a direction foreshadowed by his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference¹⁰. This speech was followed by significant military actions: the intervention in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine in 2022.

Within this context, Latin America's role on Russia's geopolitical board became increasingly defined. One notable example was the 2008 deployment of a nuclear cruiser and an anti-submarine ship for joint exercises with Venezuela, which included stops in Cuba and Nicaragua. From this point

¹⁰ Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (10.02.2007), available in <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

forward, Russia's military presence in the Caribbean took on a more provocative tone, with recurring statements about establishing military bases in the region and agreements allowing military ships to use port facilities in Nicaragua. This was accompanied by bomber visits and the open deployment of Russian military personnel to Venezuela between 2018 and 2019. The latter development occurred amid widespread international refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's presidency, escalating US and European sanctions, and rhetoric from both the White House and Miraflores that hinted at the potential for U.S. military intervention. These moves underscored Russia's readiness to leverage regional divergences in Latin America to project its power and challenge Western influence.

The frequency of visits leading up to the military attack on Ukraine, along with those that have occurred since, has brought the relationships and asymmetries into sharper focus, revealing the risks for a Latin America that is interdependent in the face of threats but insufficiently integrated to address them. A range of national political, foreign policy, geopolitical, and economic factors contribute to this situation, as do the varying principles and conveniences guiding each country's response¹¹. Amidst this fragmentation, three distinct groups of countries can be identified.

11 David J. Kramer, "Russia and Latin America After February 24", in David J. Kramer, Vladimir Rouvinski & Andrei Serbin Pons, *The Impact of War in Ukraine on Latin America and the Caribbean*, FIU Digital Commons (no. 7, 2022), available in: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=jgi_research

The first group, the most easily identifiable, comprises regimes with increasing internal and external fragility, which cultivate deeply asymmetrical relationships where security and economic interests, political affinities, and openness to Russia's international influence and initiatives prevail in varying degrees. This group includes the regimes of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, along with the Bolivian government—though more discreetly under the presidency of Luis Arce—and is often joined by Honduras in statements. Despite the demands of the war in Ukraine, meetings and agreements with Russia have become less frequent but more significant due to their timing and rhetoric, often focusing on sovereignty and non-interference, interpreted through the authoritarian lens of a “rules-based world order.” This perspective aligns with the broader autocratic segment of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, convened by Venezuela in 2023 and prominently sponsored by Russia.

The second group consists of current governments in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay, which have distanced themselves from or avoided overt political affinity with Russia. Notably, some of these countries are among the largest regional trading partners, including Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, and Ecuador, and have benefited from vaccine diplomacy that spread across much of Latin America. This group—except for Argentina's initial, later moderated, position—has condemned Russia's invasion within the OAS, the UN General Assembly, and the UN Human Rights Council.

Since Gustavo Petro became president, Colombia has found itself among a third group of governments that adopt a neutral stance, along with the administrations of Lula da Silva in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. For these countries, the relationship with Russia plays a key role in their geopolitical strategies. In Mexico, as demonstrated by the presence of Russian soldiers in a recent national military parade, the relationship with Russia is interpreted as a symbol of autonomy and a nod to revolutionary ideals, suggesting independence from the northern neighbor and the rest of the region. Brazil's socialist government, a BRICS member, has focused on reclaiming its international leadership role and advocating for mediation diplomacy, while also safeguarding trade with Russia, particularly in fertilizer imports. Both Mexico and Brazil have voted in favor of UN resolutions condemning the invasion of Ukraine but have avoided joining similar hemispheric and subregional statements, often through abstentions and diplomatic proposals, thereby encouraging a more detached regional response to the war.

In his own way, with distinct challenges and international ambitions, Colombian President Gustavo Petro rebalances his political and geopolitical positions with rhetoric that generally condemns violence but downplays Russia's culpability, even though he refrains from making overt political gestures toward Putin's government.

Vulnerability and dangers

Russia's engagement with Latin America has mirrored the totalitarian and expansionist trajectory of the regime under

Vladimir Putin's control. This far-reaching policy has served as a demonstration of domestic stability, international assertiveness, and resistance to US influence. In Latin America, Moscow's approach and strategies have dictated the pace and nature of these relationships: emphasizing opacity and geopolitical maneuvering that disregard human rights, democratic commitments, and, crucially, national sovereignty.

The key challenge for Latin American democracies is to address a significant regional vulnerability: the lack of a unified stance on these three critical issues. To do so, the deceptive and ultimately harmful calls for unified positions without clear consideration of the respective governments' stances on these core principles must end. This shift would enable a more principled and security-focused response to Russia, ensuring that varied national interests do not undermine shared values and regional security.