

Rumor mill: Venezuela in global disinformation and propaganda networks

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“A pluricentric and multipolar world has already emerged”, stated Nicolás Maduro last June from the Simón Bolívar International Airport –standing on a red carpet, surrounded by officials in suits and soldiers with red berets, and facing windows covered with his and Hugo Chávez’s faces-. “All are emerging countries of the new world that is being built”. Maduro was returning from a ‘Eurasian’ tour in which he visited various countries with postmodern kings and autocrats between the Maghreb and Central Asia, as if they were members of a supposed Autocratic International. Just a few months earlier, Russian tanks had crossed the flowered steppes of Donbass in what seemed to be a bet on the end of the unipolar world: a stab at the liberal order, with its multilateral organizations and portfolios with English words, and the end of the history of Reagan and the Bushes and the Clintons.

By August, the Venezuelan government –as if spitting on any approach to the Western sphere, constantly pinching it with mentions of “democratization” and “human rights”– irreverently proclaimed Barquisimeto as the host of the seventh edition of the International Army Games: a military competition organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense for a universe of client countries, friendly anti-Western titans, and Soviet nostalgics orbiting around

Vladimir Putin's imperial dreams. With enormous rifles and colored berets and tanks with vibrant camouflage, soldiers from a handful of countries from Asia, socialist Latin America, and the former Soviet Union competed alongside Venezuelan soldiers in a sort of illiberal video game brought to reality.

But Venezuela's flirtations with the "pluricentric and multipolar world" –to the realms of the Eurasian steppes, soberly rejecting the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic– have not been limited merely to military games or Russia Today-inspired speeches: they also manifest in the fluctuations of disinformation and digital propaganda, aspects of our Black Mirror in which Venezuela has become a spearhead. In fact, the media of the chavismo communication apparatus have become content replicators for the Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik, which have correspondents, social media accounts with massive reach, international television channels, and hundreds of employees. According to a report¹ by Transparencia Internacional, *EsPaja*, *Probox*, and *Cazadores de Fake News*, Venezuelan state or pro-chavismo media went from mentioning around 20 articles from RT and Sputnik per month in 2019 to over 500 by mid-2022.

According to the investigation, the promotion of Russian narratives preceded the invasion: "This came from the momentum that the whole Sputnik V [vaccine] issue had during the pandemic, where the [public media] information about vaccines was replicated from RT and Sputnik, the agency", says Victor Amaya, journalist and editorial coordinator from *TalCual*. "There was obviously an interest in saying that the best vaccine is the Russian one, which was the one they were finally going to acquire here in Venezuela". *La Hojilla*, says Amaya, tried to compare the effectiveness of the

¹ <https://transparenciave.org/rusia-y-venezuela-aliados-para-desinformar/>

Sputnik vaccine against the American Pfizer vaccine. He also explains that there was “that mess” surrounding the English AstraZeneca vaccine when the Venezuelan government did not authorize it in Venezuela and refused to receive them through the Covax mechanism promoted by the WHO.

The use of the vaccine as soft power in Latin America was not limited to Venezuela. “It aligned Venezuela with Mexico and aligned Venezuela with Argentina, which was in charge not only of translating all the scientific materials of the Sputnik V into Spanish but also announced that a vaccine production plant would be installed in Argentina”, explains Amaya. However, the plant has not been completed yet, and the second dose of Sputnik vaccines never arrived in Venezuela.

However, the replication of content from RT and Sputnik began to skyrocket from November 2022 –when Russian troops began to position themselves, like a ring, around the edges of Ukraine. The way the information is replicated by state media or media close to the government apparatus– especially *Telesur*, *VTV*, and *La Iguana*, but also *Últimas Noticias* and *Venezuela News*– is “practically a copy and paste”, says Amaya. But the use of these Russian platforms as primary sources of information, explains the journalist, is not limited to repeating Russian narratives about their foreign policy: “The content produced by RT is widely used in official media as an international news agency, covering what happens in France, what happens in Europe, and even what happens in the United States”, he explains, “[Russian media] has been used to talk even about Juan Guaidó”. According to the journalist, this strategy seeks to “validate” pro-officialist narratives by framing them as information from a prestigious international news agency, similar to Reuters, AP, or AFP.

Additionally, public channels such as *VTV*, *Tves*, *Vive TV*, and *Conciencia TV* have broadcast emblematic programs from RT, Russian children's programs, and even a documentary produced in Russia about the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia in the nineties. Also, the television program *La Hojilla* –historically one of the most incisive instruments of chavismo to discredit its opponents and promote polarization as a tool for political mobilization– regularly reads headlines taken from RT at least 3 to 5 times per average broadcast, according to the *Transparencia* and anti-disinformation media report, between June and July 2022.

The pro-Russian narrative in Venezuelan government media is clear: the Bucha massacre, for example, is only portrayed on *Telesur* as a “false episode”, a “provocation by Ukraine”, and a “massacre of civilians with the participation of human rights organizations”. On the website of *Venezolana de Televisión*, the massacre is described as a “Ukraine setup” and an “alleged massacre”. In contrast, it denounces Ukraine's attacks against civilians in the “Republic of Donetsk” (a Russian puppet state in occupied Ukraine not recognized internationally), celebrates Russian military victories, blames Ukraine for blocking peace negotiations, and speaks of “genocide by Kiev”. Even *Últimas Noticias*, a private media outlet bought by entrepreneurs close to chavismo, talks about a “genocide in Donbás” carried out by Ukraine as one of the reasons that motivated Putin's “special military operation”.

The purpose of this replication of narratives is to “generate a discursive line that is somehow aligned with Russian interests in Latin America and around the globe, but also with the interests of Russian allies”, says Amaya, such as Venezuela or Nicaragua: in other words, a rejection of the Western narrative and the reports from major media outlets of liberal democracies. Additionally,

coordinating disinformation and propaganda is part of a larger approach between Russia and Venezuela: both countries have signed more than 260 bilateral agreements, including some in 2022 and 2023. In fact, in October 2021, an interministerial agreement on communications was established between Russia and Venezuela during the XV Russia-Venezuela High-Level Commission. However, Amaya explains, that “the terms of the agreements that have been signed, including the communications part, are not public”.

Furthermore, a sanctioned Venezuela also serves as a narrative instrument for a sanctioned Russia: “Russia is also a sanctioned country, Russia is also a country that faces the United States and the West, and Russia is a country with significant oil business”, explains Amaya, “So there are certain similarities in the way both countries are understood” in Russian and Venezuelan media. Even “critical” reports from Russian media outlets like Lenta resort to inaccuracies and biased views about Venezuela that align with the narrative promoted by chavismo and its allies: “In the 1990s, large oligarchs shared power in Venezuela. Even then, the economy depended heavily on resource extraction, and all income from oil sales was divided among the political elites. Corruption and nepotism flourished in the country, social stratification was monstrous, and ordinary citizens were poor. The situation began to change when the charismatic Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998”, reads one of the reports from Lenta.

In fact, explains Amaya, there is a sort of symbiosis between the media apparatus of chavismo and those of Russia. For example, RT uses public buildings in Venezuela –such as the studios of *Venezolana de Televisión*– for broadcasting, and their correspondents Erika Ortega Sanoja and Jessica Sosa were former members of *Venezolana de Televisión* and *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*.

There is also no pretense of objectivity, which is typical of Western agencies: Ortega Sanoja was elected as a substitute deputy for the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela).

According to an anonymous journalistic source who worked at Telesur until 2014, consulted in the report by *Transparencia* and other organizations, “Telesur represented the great center of approach for other countries to reach Latin America. There was not so much a journalistic interest, but rather the construction of the relationship. In this way, Telesur served as a catapult for the penetration of channels like RT or Arab media like Al Mayadeen”. Additionally, Telesur received Russian training courses and content as compensation.

Our America, our disinformation

The dissemination of pro-officialist news and narratives operates within a connected ecosystem of international media that quote each other or replicate articles from one another. This ecosystem², dating back to at least 2003, includes media outlets such as *La Pluma* in Spain, *El Popular* in Uruguay, *The Grayzone* in the Anglophone world, *Red de Solidaridad con la Venezuela Revolucionaria* in Sweden, *Debate Plural* in the Dominican Republic, *Orinoco Tribune*, *Declassified UK* in the United Kingdom, and the government-affiliated *Misión Verdad*. In fact, according to a report from the University of Oxford, Facebook identifies Venezuela as one of the seven countries engaged in digital influence operations in other nations and as part of a group of countries with cyber-troops of “high capacity”.

2 <https://proboxve.org/en-US/publicacion/portales-de-la-mentira-como-es-el-enjambre-internacional-de-medios-independientes-al-servicio-de-las-narrativas-chavistas>

Such troops operate by distributing “content based on orders from the Ministry of Information, aligning many official and unofficial accounts, some of which are managed in a somewhat automated manner”, explains Amaya. For instance, these accounts are given a daily content goal, and many of them are currently paid through bonuses from *Sistema Patria*, a system of payments and state benefits established in 2016.

According to an investigation coordinated by *Transparencia*, *EsPaja*, *ProBox*, and *Medianálisis*, this penetration into the online realm dates back to the beginning of Nicolás Maduro’s presidency when they sought to counter the perceived dominance of opposition and critical sectors on social media. In fact, in 2013, Maduro called for the creation of a “Bolivarian Twitter”, and two years later, a *Red Patria* with alternatives to WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter called *Nido*, *Colibrí*, and *Cardenalito* was established. By 2017, a manual of action for an “army of trolls” of the Bolivarian Revolution promoted by the *Gran Misión Justicia Socialista* had been leaked. This army was divided into squads, platoons, companies, battalions, and brigades, with the latter subdivision consisting of up to 500 people and 11,500 accounts. The success of the Venezuelan government’s digital troops has been such that operations of Castro counter-propaganda were detected in Cuba, surrounding the protests of 2021, “which replicate many of the methods we have studied here,” says Amaya.

In fact, as explained by Iris Puyosa, an expert in information operations and senior research fellow at the Atlantic Council, coordinated operations from Venezuela have become frequent in Latin America. “There is growing evidence of coordinated campaigns from Venezuela in various processes in Latin America, both in protests and electoral processes”, explains Puyosa. According to the expert, these coordinated account operations from Venezuela

have been observed at times when certain governments leave power for different reasons, such as the departure of Evo Morales in Bolivia or Pedro Castillo in Peru. Additionally, Puyosa points out that similar operations have been recorded in Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile. “In some cases, they support their allies, while in other cases, they attack the adversaries of their allies”, she says.

Although this is an ongoing activity, it is unknown whether it is increasing, but its detection is. Furthermore, there are other cases in which Venezuelan actors are involved, but the operations appear to be coordinated from other countries. This is not an isolated phenomenon: according to a 2022 investigation by the digital observatory *Probox*, Venezuela coordinates its disinformation campaigns with other authoritarian regimes in the region. According to the research, 22 hashtags trended simultaneously in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, with more than 3,799,612 tweets. “The coordination between these countries is not only military or ideological but also on social media”, explained *Probox* Director María Virginia Marín to the media outlet *Divergentes*.

And the digital penetration by the Venezuelan state is not limited to Latin America. According to data from Twitter Elections Integrity, Venezuelan digital operations during the 2016 US presidential campaign –and the month after the elections– had more exposure than operations from China and Iran. However, the operations from Russia were more significant than those of the other three countries combined.

The Illiberals Club

Although information from Venezuela’s official media occasionally appears in pro-Iranian or sympathizing media

outlets of the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah, such as Al Mayadeen or Al Manar, the pro-Chavista or closely government-linked narrative is not as frequent in agencies from other authoritarian countries or groups that proclaim themselves anti-Western or anti-capitalist. “China has the Xinhua agency”, explains Amaya, “but it does not have the same quantity, the same presence, the same impact, or the same deployment in public media as RT or Sputnik”. Even the Turkish agency Anadolu publishes content that is not precisely favorable to Chavismo. According to Amaya, the replication of Venezuelan state media by agencies of other friendly countries beyond Russia has been limited to information relevant to those countries, such as state visits of Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

However, there seem to be cases of cooperation between Venezuela and its international allies in propaganda or digital disinformation campaigns. For example, members and sympathizers of Turkey’s ruling party, the Justice and Development Party, to which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan belongs and which is close to Chavismo, coordinated content on Twitter in early 2019 with Venezuelan government officials, such as Jorge Rodríguez, as part of a campaign titled #WeAreMaduro in support of Maduro after Juan Guaidó’s presidential proclamation. “They tweeted the same things, retweeted each other”, says Puyosa, “It was a truly spectacular campaign”.

However, there are possible indications of coordination between Venezuela and other authoritarian regimes to digitally interfere in foreign electoral processes and political conflicts. In fact, Venezuela’s digital meddling through bots and trolls in the politics of other countries has been documented. These accounts “amplify, for example, videos they have planted on YouTube or these pseudonews websites that have false content”, explains

Puyosa, “In other cases, they engage in conversations about current topics with extremist arguments and insults, attacking political actors, journalists, activists, generating an environment of toxicity and polarization” beyond seeking a real impact on electoral dynamics.

In this way, more internal conflict is generated in other countries with the intention of destabilizing them: “They increase polarization, create an atmosphere of tension, sow doubts about the veracity of circulating information, and foster mistrust in the media and political actors”, says Puyosa. The result, by amplifying extremist positions and undermining the possibility of discussions seeking consensus or “civilized disagreements”, is a lack of trust in the political institutions of those countries and a view that other political factions are enemies.

In an operation documented by Twitter’s Elections Integrity Datasets focused on the 2018 United States midterm elections, during which 764 Venezuelan accounts pretending to be American were identified aiming to encourage polarization in the United States. “There were MAGA [Make American Great Again] accounts, and another set of accounts were Black Lives Matter”, says Puyosa, “It’s the same strategy that has been used in Venezuela for a long time, creating accounts that are from extreme opposition and accounts from the Chavismo facing off on Twitter”. However, it is noteworthy that Iranian and Russian accounts were also identified “doing similar things, but it is not clear if there is coordination”, she adds.

In the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, there was also evidence of digital coordination between accounts managed by Venezuelans and Catalan separatists, explains the expert. “The same company that created the VenApp”, a Venezuelan government

application, ran the campaign, says Puyosa. In Honduras, she says there was also evidence of coordination between Venezuelan actors and the current president Xiomara Castro's campaign.

Furthermore, in 2019, the Chilean government conducted a study analyzing the messages spread on social media during the protests in Chile that year. The study concluded that many of these messages originated from Moscow and Caracas. However, according to Puyosa, this case is "quite controversial" because the conclusions reached by a private company hired by the Chilean government, a Chilean university, and independent researchers have been different from each other regarding whether there was a coordinated effort and what the impact of that campaign was. "There is no consensus that allows to assert with certainty if there was a significant presence of Venezuelan operations there", she explains.

Venezuela is fixed – in India

Coordinated operations by Venezuelan actors also seek to promote other types of narratives linked to the Venezuelan government. After months of rumors fueled by random music accounts on social media, the US media outlet MarketWatch published a press release on April 25th of last year announcing that "Coldplay will perform for the first time in Venezuela". According to the publication, the concert was being produced by Solid Show Productions and would take place on September 28th at Hacienda Santa Teresa, a tourist estate owned by Ron Santa Teresa. The press release even quoted Juan Carlos Araujo, president of Solid Show. But there was a catch: Araujo had been arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 20 years in prison for drug trafficking and money laundering. Solid Show had been inactive for seven years. Santa Teresa soon discredited the news. Why did MarketWatch, a

prestigious financial website owned by Dow Jones & Company, publish this obvious hoax?

The truth is that MarketWatch took it from COMTEX, an online news distributor, which had taken it from Vehement Media: an Indian press release distribution service. In fact, the city mentioned in the press release was Coimbatore, in southern India. The media contact was someone named Pranesh Balaji, who works at Amazon Web Services and lives in Coimbatore according to his LinkedIn. However, the details of the fake press release were quite Venezuelan: it mentioned *TicketMundo* and the local band *Tomates Fritos*. Why would a press release distributor in Coimbatore publish a press release clearly written by a Venezuelan about a concert in Aragua?

Of course, the possibility of a mere joke is always there, but one has to wonder if the intentions behind the press release were political, in line with the new Madurista mantra of “economic recovery”. The press release, in fact, mentioned the non-existent concert as a “landmark event in the country’s history” that would attract attendees from neighboring countries. Venezuela is fixed!

In fact, this narrative of recovery and patriotism has been promoted by accounts and “journalists” who do not have explicit ties to the government or state media. For example, self-proclaimed journalist Vanessa Ortiz –who apparently has no explicit ties to any website or media outlet– posted videos on Twitter to demonstrate that the country is not under an alleged authoritarian regime. “Every weekend, Maduro’s ‘regime’ ‘represses’ Venezuelans”, she tweeted with a TikTok video showing trucks and people partying on a Venezuelan beach.

And as demonstrated by the publication of a press release in English or the messages directed at foreigners seeking to invisibilize the existence of an autocratic regime in Venezuela, the “Venezuela is fixed” message seems to be also targeting people abroad: part of the government’s propaganda and disinformation machinery to promote positive narratives around Venezuela, which has gained the image of an economic and humanitarian disaster in the world, and cleaning up Maduro’s government’s image at a time when it desperately seeks international legitimacy.

The Caribbean Series held in Caracas, for example, was used to promote this narrative on Twitter: according to research by the digital observatory *Probox*, while teachers and the public sector were organizing protests in the streets, the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information and its Twitter troops positioned a series of hashtags that promoted a narrative of “enjoyment and national joy” –at a moment of international sports relevance, with the eyes of the region on the new stadium *La Rinconada*, and with hundreds of tourists from Caribbean countries in Venezuela– to the point that 96% of the tweets about the Caribbean Series came from possible automated accounts.

In fact, the Caribbean Series is featured in another iconic episode of official propaganda around the “Venezuela is fixed” narrative: the use of supposed English-speaking journalists, created with artificial intelligence software *Synthesia*, who narrate the country’s alleged well-being in a digital news program called *House of News*. There, in the form of YouTube ads and content on that platform and TikTok, the avatars accused international media of promoting a false narrative about Venezuela’s “destroyed” economy – highlighting instead maximum hotel occupancy during Carnival or the alleged profits generated by the baseball series. The videos, which garnered hundreds of thousands of

views, were also broadcast on *Venezolana de Televisión*. There, in perfect English, the avatar journalists emphasized that *Venezuela is fixed*.

But what is the purpose of this? The use of English and the use of avatars pretending to be blond or black Anglo-Saxon journalists seem to indicate that these narratives about a general economic rebound and the success of an international baseball series –rejecting at the same time journalistic reports on the massive contraction of Venezuela’s economy in recent years– seek an international projection that cleans up the government’s and the country’s image: far from the isolated autocracy, undergoing a complex humanitarian crisis, that international and independent national media have portrayed in the last decade.

The Republic of Disinformation

Sometimes, Venezuela is inserted into global networks of disinformation and digital propaganda in unexpected ways. In July 2022, an investigation by the *Digital Forensics Lab* and the media outlet *Animal Político* uncovered a disinformation and propaganda network consisting of 114 websites created by four individuals based in Venezuela. They used platforms owned by Turkish-origin companies to promote domestic narratives in Mexico, El Salvador, Spain, and Peru. Through four thousand Facebook groups, with at least 147 million subscribers, the network distributed false information.

Most of the narratives aligned with the interests of the Venezuelan government: in Mexico, the accounts promoted fake news about President Andrés Manuel López Obrador; in Bolivia, they spread false information against interim President Jeanine Áñez; in Spain, they attacked lawmakers from the *Vox* and *Partido*

Popular parties while praising *Podemos* and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*; and in Peru, they promoted the government of Pedro Castillo. However, one case stood out: in El Salvador, the accounts promoted and celebrated the government of Nayib Bukele, who is at odds with the Chavismo and has advisors from the hardline opposition party, *Voluntad Popular*. Why this dissonance?

The answer lies lost in the dubious channels of disinformation and digital propaganda that enter Venezuela and leave it: like a turbid river that expands, erodes, and saturates the cyberspace of other countries. Thus, Venezuela –among the world champions of disinformation, among the great armies of trolls in the universe– promises to become an agora of fake news, manufactured scandals, malevolent avatars of artificial intelligence, and a phantom multitude of ten thousand accounts managed from the dark and damp office of some ministry in Caracas or Moscow or Istanbul that harass, shout, and corrode: in our cyberspace, like a monstrosity that devours itself, the anachronistic extreme left and the postmodern extreme right and ideological necrophilia and the propaganda of insignificant politicians and brothel gossip and and *Ronda Magazine* the *Misión Verdad* and Sputnik news agency are destined to become one.