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**Assessing the Form and Impact of Russian Strategic
Communications in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Around two months after Russia's invasion of Crimea, Putin awarded the Order of Service to the Fatherland to around 300 journalists.ⁱ Their service to the fatherland included friendly coverage of the Russian invasion; media was a key piece of the hybrid attack plan against Ukraine. The Russian 2013 foreign policy concept clearly outlines the important role that Russia's leadership expects strategic communications to play in foreign affairs; it states: "Russia will seek to ensure its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of Russian mass media in the international information environment providing them with essential state support, as well as actively participate in international information cooperation, and take necessary measures to counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security."ⁱⁱ

The aims of Russian strategic communications are first and foremost to preserve the regime in Moscow. The primary audiences for Russian strategic communications are Russians living inside Russia. The media narrative intends to portray Putin as a strong leader standing up to the west and helping the country and the Russian people regain lost territory and global stature.

Secondary audiences for Russian strategic communications include ethnic Russians living in nearby nations, westerners, especially Europeans who favor non-confrontation with Russia, and finally receptive audiences across the world including those in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Russian propaganda, often masquerading as legitimate news, is disseminated through state-funded media and proxies to confuse and obscure objective facts, draw spurious moral equivalencies between Russia's actions and those of the West, and to spin

conspiratorial theories in order to allow Russia to attain its strategic objectives: regime preservation above all else, but also the dual secondary objectives of executing its foreign policy with minimal pushback, and lessening the political, military, diplomatic, and moral influence of the West and western institutions.

By seeking influence in the Western Hemisphere, Russia is responding to what it perceives to be American interference in its own “sphere of influence,” which is understood to be a direct challenge to the sustainment of the regime itself. Additionally, by crafting alliances in the western hemisphere, Russia can poke a stick in the eye of the U.S., while simultaneously disseminating information at home that equates influence in Latin America and the Caribbean with a return to the status of a global power. Russian strategic communications in the western hemisphere trumpets the message that a new multi-polar world is emerging, one in which the U.S. is reduced to the role of one of a few equals, a world consequently where coordinating effective deterrents or reactions to Russia’s foreign policy becomes near impossible. Furthermore, not only is the era of U.S. domination rapidly ending; it’s in the interest of the region to help hasten its end. Russian strategic communications hone in on the decadence and injustice of the U.S., delivering a message that the U.S. brings with it instability, and the future interests of the region lie in a multi-polar world, or with Russia. The U.S. and the West in general are corrupt, immoral, and overall a force for instability and chaos in the world.

Russian leadership disseminates propaganda abroad largely through state-sponsored media companies. RT, launched in 2005 as Russia Today, is a 24-hour English-language television news station, which claims to reach 700 million people in more than 100 countries. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that RT was created to

“try to break the Anglo–Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.”ⁱⁱⁱ RT opened RT America in 2010 and RT en Español, in 2009. Today RT en Español has bureaus in Madrid, Miami, Los Angeles, Havana and Buenos Aires.

RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia^{iv} were collapsed into Rossiya Segodnya, a radio and wire service in 2013, to further consolidate control. While formally separate, Rossiya Segodnya and RT are widely perceived as working with one another under the same editor-in-chief.

Putin is personally invested in the work of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, vetoing the Finance Ministry’s efforts to reduce RT’s funding in 2012.^v RT’s budget for 2015 is at least \$241 million^{vi} but more likely as high as \$400 million.^{vii} Rossiya Segodnya will receive \$170 million—a significant increase.^{viii}

Russia utilizes a host of other media companies funded by the state or entities with ties to the state, including Sputnik. Jeff Trimble, deputy director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors’ International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), recently claimed Russia spends \$400-500 million a year on foreign information efforts while blocking U.S. government broadcasts into Russia. This is in reality likely a lowball estimate; Russia likely spends upward of \$1 billion.^{ix}

Last summer Argentina announced that RT en Español (also known as RT Actualidad) would be broadcast 24/7 in the country, making it the only foreign TV channel to be broadcast inside the country.^x RT en Español’s YouTube Channel has 348,062 subscribers and almost 5 million monthly views, almost 5 times the amount of monthly views RT America receives by comparison.^{xi}

Russian strategic communications powerfully and often effectively put into effect the aims and narratives outlined in the policy directives emanating from Moscow. Some recent headlines from RT en Español include an article contrasting Argentina's tolerance to Muslims with a rise of "Islamophobia" in Europe. Another article entitled "Unexpected Data of Child Poverty in the U.S.," quotes a fringe professor who describes the U.S. as the "world leader" in child poverty. An article entitled "What Separates Russians and Americans and Why Sanctions are Meaningless," calls sanctions regime "blackmail" and "economic terrorism." Another article is on "why the U.S. does not accept that the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are independent." Finally there is also a picture of Uncle Sam accompanied by U.S. flag-decorated hands which are menacingly moving toward a picture of Venezuela; this article describes how many experts claim the U.S. is planning a military campaign against Venezuela.

A further example of how Russia uses state media to promote its own version or a fabricated version of events. Three Russian media channels reported in April 2015 that a 10 year-old girl was killed by a shell fired by Ukrainian forces in the Donetsk region. A BBC reporter traveled to the girls supposed hometown and interviewed locals, all of whom claimed to have known about the dead girl, but none of whom had heard any shelling the day of her supposed death. Reporters tried to find her family, or anyone who knew her, go to the office of records and then the mortuary, all to no avail. Finally, some Russian reporters on the ground told the BBC correspondent the entire story was made up, there was no girl, and that they were told to report that.^{xii} An entirely fabricated story, because of media saturation, becomes reality in the minds of the people on the ground, shaping their perception of the conflict.

Former Russian TV producer Peter Pomerantsev describes a Russian media industry where editorial decisions are controlled in a strict vertical manner by political technologists. A savvy use of a variety of media platforms amplifies the impact of Russian strategic communications, often with a minimal cost in terms of time or money; one such example is the tweeting of embedded clips from Russian TV channels. Russia uses social media to reinforce and amplify its strategic messaging, and they are known to pay people to flood Internet comment boards with pro-Putin propaganda and replicate policy objectives and themes, and operate government run centers where twitter trolls spread the Kremlin's message.^{xiii} While RT en Español (590,000) has far fewer followers than either BBC Mundo (1.23M) or CNN en Español, (10.1M) they are far more active on Twitter with 227,000 tweets (since December 2009), 3.7 times that of BBC Mundo (61K) and 4.6 times more than CNN en Español (48.6K).

Overseas, Russian strategic communications cannot fully convince audiences that Russia's versions of events are truthful. The design therefore is to create enough uncertainty and doubt in the objective truth, often through more and more outlandish conspiracy theories or through a repeated theme or message that audiences begin to question what is actually true. This in turn saps ideological opposition to Russia's narrative, and enervates the standing of the U.S. and U.S.-friendly governments in the region. Russian TV channels have a reach into Latin and South America, and carry the Kremlin's strategic aims by targeting their messages to this audience, often through the hiring of locals as news correspondents. Additionally, Russian news is also quoted as a

source in stories written by media within the region, notably teleSUR in Venezuela, which has a broad geographic reach, among others.

An example of a story produced initially by Russian media and then picked up by media in Latin America is an article teleSUR ran in March 2015, “NATO Installs Information Warfare Center in Latvia,”^{xiv} a complete mischaracterization of a new NATO-certified but not controlled think tank created to study both Russian and ISIL weaponization of media. Russia has found some receptive audiences in Latin America, especially in places like Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and El Salvador, and currently a sympathetic government in Argentina. In these nations, Russia doesn’t have to work as hard to get its strategic communications across or cited. It’s often in the interest of the government there to produce similar anti-U.S. messaging.

A lack of press freedom and independent media in the Latin America and Caribbean region provides an opening for Russian strategic messaging to go unchallenged. According the 2014 Reporters Without Borders 2014 World Press Freedom Index the region struggles with very poor rankings, including (out of 180): Bolivia (94), Cuba (170), Mexico (152), Nicaragua (71), Peru (104), and Venezuela (116).^{xv}

Russia hopes to use soft power to create discord in the transatlantic alliance. In France, “La Russie d’Aujourd’hui,” a pro-Russia supplement, is published monthly in Le Figaro. These sections are difficult to distinguish from the rest of the newspaper and put forth a particularly sanguine spin on Russian foreign policy and leadership. In Germany, Rossiya Segodnya plans a Berlin office staffed by 30 people, and RT has begun German broadcasts. While unfavorable views of Russia are on the rise in the U.S. and Europe,

Russian leaders are taking a long-term view of their soft power strategy, betting that it will eventually weaken and erode the transatlantic alliance. In the U.S., the Russian media has not been silent, supplementing the RT America news channel with paid sections in American newspapers such as The Washington Post.^{xvi}

Op-eds parroting the Kremlin line are a favorite tactic; Putin himself wrote one for the New York Times in September 2013 where he argued against intervening in Syria and even wrote “we must stop using the language of force and return to the path of civilized diplomatic and political settlement.”^{xvii} These words were printed less than six months before Russia invaded Ukraine. The op-ed has a hushed, conciliatory, and peaceful tone which played on the then growing American public's sentiment against foreign intervention. The op-ed was placed in the New York Times for Putin by the American PR firm Ketchum, which had a nine-year relationship with Moscow worth at least \$60 million.^{xviii} In another instance, last September, Al Jazeera ran an op-ed entitled “West v. Russia: Propaganda War Rages On.” From the title, you instantly get the idea that the West does “propaganda” in the same way as Russia, centrally planned and controlled, with objective truth being a mere detail to be dispensed. The op-ed argues that the West's “propaganda” efforts dwarf those of Russia, and that they are far more effective than Russia's. The author equates western support for institution and democracy building as part of its propaganda portfolio, as well as American TV, movies, and games. The author of the piece is Alexander Nekrassov, a former Kremlin advisor and Voice of Russia correspondent in London. Often Russian propaganda is spread through NGOs; Rossotrudnichestvo, an organization devoted to spreading knowledge of Russia and its values abroad, will rise from \$60 million to \$300 million by 2020.^{xix}

While Russia has become adept at using strategic communications to support its policy aims, it is useful to note that it is leveraged in conjunction with other tools at the state's disposal. Russian strategic communications' push works symbiotically alongside economic tools, use of military hardware and technological transfers (especially to Venezuela), and diplomatic support. Strategic communications are a vital pillar of hybrid warfare, a war that the Kremlin views as constantly having to be waged against outsiders for the very survival of the state.

Challenges to Russian Strategic Communications in the SOUTHCOM Region

- **U.S. Media:** Continued U.S media influence and penetration in the region.
- **Venezuela:** How the situation in Venezuela develops, could expose an area of potential weakness for Russian strategic communications in the region. Whoever comes after Nicolás Maduro may not be as interested in towing the Russian strategic communications line as closely, or may need all the political capital they need to keep the country from falling apart.
- **Cuba:** Another development that could be complicating to Russia is the elevation of U.S. diplomatic engagement in Cuba which may undermine Russian messaging on the island.
- **Budget Cuts:** Reports of layoffs and budget cuts at certain Russian media outlets including TASS^{xx} could foreshadow more cuts affecting additional outlets in the future. The trajectories of the Russian economy, as well as the veracity of the reports, remain to be seen. However, at present, the willingness of Russian leadership to keep strategic communications remains strong overall.

- **Ties to the United States:** Another area of weakness for Russian strategic communications in Latin America and the Caribbean are the economic, political, historic, and cultural ties between the region and the United States. Trade and investment between the U.S. and Latin America and the Caribbean dwarf the region's trade and investment with Russia. According to the 2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength, "The U.S. sells more goods to Latin America and the Caribbean than it sells to the entire European Union (EU). Out of the twenty free trade agreements (FTAs) that the U.S. has entered into force, eleven are with countries in Latin America"^{xxi}; compare that with Russia that has no FTA's currently in the region. Additionally, religious ties, language ties, familial ties, and military-to-military relations pose a significant roadblock to Russian strategic communications in the region. Russia deploys strategic communications in conjunction with other hard and soft power tools; however the U.S. also has the same tools at its disposal to shape the landscape of a region.

Recommendations

- **Support for independent journalists.** This is something governments, NGOs, the private sector, and private philanthropy can do. Independent journalists are under serious threat in many countries in Latin America, yet they are critical actors who can assist in exposing the extent to which Russian strategic communications have penetrated Latin America. They can also be a force for countering pernicious messages. For instance, one Slovakian man Juraj Smatana published a list of 42 websites that spread Russian propaganda in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.^{xxii} We see the importance of websites such as StopFake.org in Ukraine and InterpreterMag.com in the U.S., which take direct aim at Kremlin disinformation. It's not unreasonable to believe a similar light could be shone on Russian strategic

communications efforts in the SOUTHCOM region by independent media and bloggers.

- **Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation.** The U.S. must immediately and forcefully dispute and rebut Russian propaganda and disinformation with factual evidence. In addition, the U.S. should regularly emphasize the regime's suppression of independent media inside Russia.
- **Expose what's going on in Russian media.** Russia likes to portray its media as being exactly like legitimate news outlets, with the same editorial accountability and transparency, however, this is not true. When news outlets give Russian media outlets the same legitimacy as accountable news agencies, they do a great disservice to the viewer or reader.
- **Study key Russian policy documents.** Russia's policy documents detail strategic goals, narratives, and clues as to future actions. They should be closely followed as they may help the U.S. craft counter-narratives to Russian strategic communications.^{xxiii}
- **Study the extent of Russia's campaign in the region.** Understanding the full scale of Russia's strategic communications campaign in Latin America and the Caribbean and its impact on public opinion is the first step to countering it. The U.S. still does not have a full picture of Russian efforts in the region and how Russia is changing opinions towards the U.S. and U.S. policy in the region, if at all.
- **Increase international broadcasting efforts.** The U.S. should ramp up international broadcasting efforts. The first step in reinvigorating International Broadcasting is conducting reforms which include the elimination or downgrading of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, disaggregation of broadcasting services according to their function, and a regular review of international broadcasting

efforts to assess their impact and direct money to the most impactful and highest priority projects.^{xxiv} In 2005, Voice of America was carried by 100 Russian outlets;^{xxv} today there is no VOA broadcasting in Russia.^{xxvi} The Obama Administration has requested an additional \$38.6 million for Russian language broadcasting for 2016.^{xxvii} International broadcasts that target specific audiences, whether in Russia, Eastern Europe, or Latin America should once again be considered a vital tool in crafting the information space of the 21st century, and not a dusty relic of the past.

- **Tailor messaging to the region.** U.S. International Broadcasting should tailor their messaging to the region. Rather than simply translating articles or videos made for a U.S. Spanish-speaking population, the U.S. should craft messaging and programming that appeal to people living in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Additionally, academic, student, and business exchange programs with allies in the region may also help mitigate the impact of Russian propaganda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Russian strategic communications in Latin America and the Caribbean are not as effective or immediately impactful as in other regions, they may in the future prove to be a roadblock to U.S. influence in the region by predisposing the regional population against the U.S. policies. Russian messaging in the region is most effective in those countries where it finds a government that supports it, even if only temporarily due to shared policy goals. Russian strategic communications face significant challenges in the region, and the U.S. has significant advantages from which it can begin to counter a poisonous Russian narrative. However, if left unchecked, Russian strategic

communications could pose a very real, widespread challenge for the U.S. moving forward.

ⁱ NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, “Analysis of Russia’s Information Campaign Against Ukraine,” 2014, p. 16,

http://www.stratcomcoe.org/~media/SCCE/NATO_PETIJUMS_PUBLISKS_29_10.ashx.

ⁱⁱ Daniel Kochis, “Countering Russian Propaganda Abroad,” *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* No. 4286, October 21, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/10/countering-russian-propaganda-abroad>.

ⁱⁱⁱ RT, “Putin Talks NSA, Syria, Iran, Drones in RT Interview,” June 12, 2013, <http://rt.com/news/putin-rt-interview-full-577/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

^{iv} Stephen Ennis, “Putin’s RIA Novosti Revamp Prompts Propaganda Fears,” *BBC News*, December 9, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25309139> (accessed October 16, 2014).

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Nicole Gaouette, “Sanctions-Strapped Russia Outguns the U.S. in Information War,” *Bloomberg*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-04-02/sanctions-strapped-russia-outguns-the-u-s-in-information-war> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{vii} Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “Looking West, Russia Beefs Up Spending on Global Media Giants,” *The Moscow Times*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/looking-west-russia-beefs-up-spending-on-global-media-giants/507692.html> (accessed October 16, 2014).

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} Jill Dougherty, “How the Media Became One of Putin’s Most Powerful Weapons,” *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^x “Putin: RT Spanish to be broadcast in Argentina 24/7,” *RT*, July 13, 2014, <http://rt.com/news/172360-putin-argentina-visit-rt/> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xi} Robert Orttung, Elizabeth Nelson and Anthony Livshen, “How Russia Today is using YouTube,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/23/how-russia-today-is-using-youtube/> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xii} “Reports of 10 year-old killed in Ukraine ‘made up,’” *BBC*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32137302> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xiii} Dmitry Volchek and Daisy Sindelar, “One Professional Russian Troll Tells All,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/how-to-guide-russian-trolling-trolls/26919999.html> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xiv} “NATO Installs Information Warfare Center in Latvia,” *teleSUR*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/NATO-Installs-Information-Warfare-Center-in-Latvia-20150329-0017.html%29> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xv} Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2014*, <https://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php> (accessed April 24, 2015).

^{xvi} Kochis, *Countering Russian Propaganda Abroad*.

^{xvii} Editorial, Vladimir Putin, “A Plea for Caution From Russia,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?_r=0.

^{xviii} Dennis Lynch, “Russia, Ketchum End Controversial Nine-Year Public Relations Partnership,” *International Business Times*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/russia-ketchum-end-controversial-nine-year-public-relations-partnership-1844092> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xix} Gaouette, “Sanctions-Strapped Russia Outguns the U.S. in Information War.”

^{xx} “Russian Reports Say TASS Plans Deep Job, Salary Cuts,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 23, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-media-tass-economy/26809139.html> (accessed April 23, 2015).

^{xxi} Ana R. Quintana and Charlotte M. Florance, “Regions of Enduring Interest: Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa,” The Heritage Foundation *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, 2015, <http://index.heritage.org/militarystrength/important-essays-analysis/regions-enduring-interest-latin-america-caribbean-africa/> (accessed April 24, 2015).

^{xxii} Ivana Smolenova, “Russia’s Propaganda War,” *Forbes*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2015/03/25/russias-propaganda-war/> (accessed April 24, 2015).

^{xxiii} NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, “Analysis of Russia’s Information Campaign Against Ukraine,” p. 38.

^{xxiv} Helle Dale and Brett D. Schaefer, “Time to Reform U.S. International Broadcasting,” The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief No. 4206, April 24, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/04/time-to-reform-us-international-broadcasting> (accessed April 24, 2015).

^{xxv} Gaouette, “Sanctions-Strapped Russia Outguns the U.S. in Information War.”

^{xxvi} Helle Dale, “Russia’s “Weaponization” of Information,” testimony before Foreign Affairs Committee, United States House of Representatives, April 15, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/04/russias-weaponization-of-information> (accessed April 24, 2015).

^{xxvii} Gaouette.