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Putin's Latin American connection

Even prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia gained a foothold in Latin American countries. Yet the war is starting to show cracks in the relationships

Jair Bolsonaro didn't care about the warnings. Although US diplomats had told him that they considered the Brazilian leader's visit to Russia two weeks ago inappropriate, Bolsonaro flew to Moscow anyway. The right-wing populist then beamed into the television cameras together with Vladimir Putin. Unlike with French President Emmanuel Macron, the official press photo was not taken at the huge negotiating table that signals cool distance. Both gave each other a jovial pat on the back, although Bolsonaro brags about not being vaccinated against 'the little flu' Covid-19.

Argentina's President Alberto Fernández also recently travelled to Moscow. He too defied calls from Washington to postpone his trip because Russia was deploying troops on the border with Ukraine. Fernandez, a left-wing Peronist, even went so far as to say that he wanted to turn Argentina into a 'Russian entry door' into Latin America. The country's dependence on the US and on the International Monetary Fund, which Argentina owes debt to the tune of $45bn, must come to an end.

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What the two leaders sold to their supporters as a bold liberation from US imperialism and neoliberalism – or as clever geopolitics – left a sour taste after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. War is not something you can score points with in Latin America. And so they ummed and ahed: Bolsonaro declared himself 'neutral' and accused the Ukrainians of having placed their fate in the hands of a comedian. Fernández spoke of 'warlike confrontations' and pleaded for dialogue and respect for the sovereignty, territorial inviolability, and security of all parties.

But Bolsonaro and Fernández were not the only leaders in Latin America who signalled understanding for Putin. He also received support from the authoritarian, socialist brother states of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. They assured Putin of their full support. Venezuela's ruler Nicolas Maduro accused NATO and the US of having provoked the conflict.

Putin's stronghold in Latin America

For a long time already, Putin has been working for political backing from Latin America. In 2014, Russian media such as the Sputnik agency and the propaganda channel Russia Today opened offices in Latin America. Since then, they have steadily expanded their Spanish-language coverage. Cuba is a historical partner from the times of the Soviet Union. Moscow has repeatedly helped the financially strapped socialist Caribbean island with loans, cancelled its old debts, and lent it $2.3bn.

Russia expanded its relations with Venezuela under the socialist Hugo Chávez. Russia sent hundreds of advisors, military experts, computer scientists, and intelligence officers to the Caribbean. The Latin American country has extensive Russian-made military equipment, including Sukhoi fighter jets, helicopters, missile defence systems and tanks. In January, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened that he could 'neither confirm nor rule out' the possibility of sending Russian troops to Venezuela and Cuba if the US and Europe did not curtail their escalating military activities in Eastern Europe. Russia has already sent Tupolev fighter jets and warships to Venezuela for military exercises at least on three separate occasions.

Venezuela is also reported to be a platform for Russian bot factories, which are particularly active in stirring up unrest during elections or protests in the region. The country is also part of the money laundering puzzle Russia is using to circumvent international sanctions. The Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA has a business branch in Moscow to process payment transactions. Iran and Turkey are also reported to be involved in Venezuelan triangular deals in dirty gold, arms, and oil.

El Salvador's turn towards Russia and China began under the leftist government of Salvador Sánchez, but gained real momentum from 2019 onwards under millennial populist Nayib Bukele. From the start, his authoritarianism was designed to confront the US and dismantle democracy. Shortly after taking office, his ambassador in Moscow declared that Bukele wanted to be the first Salvadoran head of state to travel to Russia. The visit is scheduled for the middle of the year and has

not been cancelled so far.

The rapprochement between the two countries has taken place rather apart from diplomatic channels. There are growing indications that the introduction of Bitcoin as an official currency in El Salvador is backed by interest groups that are anchored in the US right-wing libertarian milieu and also have links to Russia. The US bitcoiner Max Keiser, one of Bukeele's advisors, has aroused by showing up as regular guest on Russia Today and publishing a whole series of tweets – which have since been deleted – against Ukraine.

An important component of Russia's Latin America strategy was the vaccine Sputnik. Russia supplied numerous Latin American governments – especially at the beginning of the vaccination campaign, when production capacity worldwide was limited. Sputnik was cheaper and easier to store than Pfizer's and Moderna's mRNA vaccines. In particular, the financially stricken Argentina relied exclusively on Sputnik for a long time.

Shooting oneself in the foot

At first glance, it therefore seems like Putin has succeeded in stirring up the 'US's backyard'. However, if one takes a closer look, the invasion of Ukraine has undone many of the successes and damaged Putin's image. Mexico, for example, has received a lot of attention from Russia since the election victory of left-wing nationalist Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018. The Mexican president repeatedly found words of praise for his Russian friends. But now the country has quickly sided with its American free trade partner and clearly condemned the Russian invasion at the UN.

The second regional power of the subcontinent, Brazil, witnessed a rather bizarre performance. Bolsonaro, who has turned from a Trump supporter to a Putin fan during his time in office, got into a dispute with his own vice-president Hamilton Mourao over Russia's actions. Mourao called for military support for Ukraine. Otherwise, he said, Russia could 'march through like Nazi Germany once did in the 1930s'. Bolsonaro publicly called him out afterwards. In the UN Security Council, however, Brazil united with Mexico in calling for a Russian troop withdrawal and a ceasefire. 'The red line has been crossed', said Brazilian Ambassador Ronaldo Costa Filho.

US military expert Evan Ellis sees a 'growing

Putin's only reliable allies are the brother countries, which are already regional pariahs. In any case, however, Latin America is once again

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slipping into a polarising logic like in the times of the Cold War. US military expert Evan Ellis sees a 'growing confrontation between a liberal and an illiberal alliance' looming. Unlike the Cold War, however, Ellis says, the West's critics are not presenting a values-based ideological counter-model, but are waving 'short-term economic gains and the tantalising liberation from inefficient structures'. The undermining of human rights and democratic standards intends to erase any possibility of holding those in power morally, politically, or legally accountable.

Latin America, too, is not immune to cyber-attacks that fuel protests and insecurity or encourage crime to undermine citizens' confidence in democracy and the market economy. Should the war in Ukraine intensify, there is a real danger that Russia will significantly expand its military presence in Latin America in order to build up a backdrop of threats against Washington. This could threaten peace in the entire region.



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