

## Digital World

# Growing Audiences and Influence: Russian Media in Latin America

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Russia's first move against Ukraine on February 24 was not the full-scale military invasion covered in the news. Several hours before its troops crossed the border, Moscow launched a round of destructive cyberattacks aimed at weakening Ukraine's digital infrastructure. These cyberattacks were coupled with a wave of online disinformation and propaganda from Russia's state-owned news outlets.

Online disinformation has long been one of Russia's go-to tactics to sway public opinion and destabilize U.S. and European democracy. The Kremlin used it to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Brexit referendum. But one key aspect of this new wave of Ukraine-related disinformation is that Russia intensified its efforts in Latin America. News outlets funded by Moscow released large amounts of Spanish-language disinformation in January to influence regional political discourse and shape Latin Americans' understanding of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

In early February, Foreign Policy reported that Russia's state-owned Spanish-language news outlets attracted more than triple the viewer engagement in the last two weeks of January than their U.S. media counterparts. Russian news outlets released 1,600 articles and

videos referencing Ukraine and received 173,200 likes, shares, and comments, nearly 40% of the engagement on all Spanish-language content about the crisis. In comparison, U.S.-based outlets Univision, CNN, and Telemundo published 722 posts on the crisis in the same period. Voz de América, the U.S. state-owned broadcaster, published only one Ukraine-related piece in all of January. February saw a mere 187 articles.

The RT network (formerly Russia Today) plays a key role in Russia's disinformation and propaganda campaign in Latin America. A 2019 RT press release claimed it was among the top five most popular international television channels in ten Latin American countries. The broadcaster also alleged the strongest growth in RT's weekly audience in 2018 occurred in Latin America, where it nearly tripled in two years to 17 million viewers. While there is anecdotal evidence that RT is indeed popular in Latin America, there is no way to corroborate RT's own claims of audience size. RT's press release cited an Ipsos study on viewership, but there is no online evidence such a study was conducted.

RT also has a large following on social media with significant user engagement, particularly on Facebook, Latin America's most popular social media platform. With 18 million followers, RT en Español's Facebook page is more popular than the English-language RT News page with its 7.4 million followers. RT en Español also beats Univision Noticias' 9.6 million Facebook followers and Noticias Telemundo's 7.8 million followers. Even CNN en Español, one of the most popular news sources in Latin America, with 13.6 million Facebook followers, cannot keep pace with RT en Español. The Russian broadcaster's success also extends to its YouTube channel, which has almost 6 million subscribers and about 4.5 billion views for its 80,000-plus videos.

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Social media is one of Russia’s most resourceful tools. It allows Moscow to quickly spread mass amounts of disinformation to large numbers of people. RT en Español and its counterpart, Sputnik Mundo, use their social media accounts to go beyond targeting individual countries and reach all of Spanish-speaking Latin America with each post. Content promotion on these platforms also drives traffic to Actualidad RT, RT’s main Spanish-language news site, where readers can consume even more Russian-sponsored news. Data from SimilarWeb, a digital intelligence provider, shows that actualidad.rt.com received 30.9 million total visits in February and 28.4 million in January, averaging 21.5 million in the two months prior. Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico have the most RT readers, accounting for 42% of traffic to the site. This is unsurprising as these countries’ leaders have had or recently developed closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and have either expressed support for Russia’s actions in Ukraine, as Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has, or declared neutrality, as Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has.

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Readers of actualidad.rt.com find a website featuring misleading

headlines such as “A Ukrainian missile hits a residential building in Donetsk and leaves at least 4 dead.” The wording portrays Ukraine as the aggressor, and the story lacks any verification from an independent source. It also states the city of Donetsk is in the “Donetsk People’s Republic,” a self-proclaimed separatist state that all UN member states, apart from Russia and a few of its allies, consider Ukrainian territory.

RT articles with such provocative headlines attract many comments on Actualidad RT and RT en Español’s social media pages. Spanish-speaking social media users engaging with the content, however, are not necessarily siding with Russia. Rather, the comments are often directed at the U.S. and its alleged hypocrisy on the international stage. The country is criticized as imperialist for involving itself in foreign conflicts for its own gain while denouncing Russia for acting similarly. This view is widespread in Latin America and echoes the rhetoric of leftist former leaders such as Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales.

Russian news outlets capitalize on that anti-American sentiment and focus on producing content that raises the tension between Latin American publics and the U.S. But this strategy is not new. Citing Russian media content that criticized Colombian President Ivan Duque’s pro-American government when protests broke out over tax and health care reforms in 2021, Bret Schafer, senior fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy told Foreign Policy that “[t]here’s no effort [from Russian state-owned outlets] to really attract people to Russia… it is to repel them from the West.”

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The extent to which Russian disinformation on the Ukraine conflict influences Latin American public opinion is difficult to determine. Developments are too recent, and data is lacking. Do Latin Americans generally view Russia's invasion of Ukraine positively? Does consuming RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo news lead to more-negative views of the U.S. and Europe and more-positive views of Russia? All that can be said now is that public opinion surveys over the last few years suggest Latin Americans are gradually developing warmer feelings towards Russia than towards Western democracies. The trend provides fertile ground for Russian media and its propaganda.

Corporación Latinobarómetro, which publishes an annual eponymous regional public opinion survey, has repeatedly asked Latin Americans about their views of the U.S. and Russia. In 2016, an average of 82.4% of people in 18 Latin American countries had a very favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of the U.S. In 2017, that figure fell to 73.1%, and it dropped further to 71.9%. Only 56.3% of those surveyed had a favorable opinion of Russia in 2015, rising to 71.3% in 2018, before slipping to almost 60%. People in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Nicaragua, and Ecuador were the most likely to have a favorable opinion of Russia in the most recent survey.

Argentina seems to show a particularly interesting trend. The

country has the region's highest number of RT online readers, and, in 2014, it was one of the first countries in the region to allow RT to broadcast on public television. Current Argentine President Alberto Fernandez has since added Telesur, the Venezuelan television network, to his country's basic national television service. Telesur now streams Russian propaganda and disinformation to 83% of the Argentine population. Given the reach of these outlets, it is an unlikely coincidence that 67.4% of Argentinian residents said in 2020 that they view Russia favorably.

The 2022 Latinobarómetro survey should shed light on whether such pro-Russia sentiment continues. If it does, Russian disinformation on the war in Ukraine may be the reason, and Washington will need take note. A stepped-up U.S. media presence in Latin America may be overdue.

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