



RUSSIA AND VENEZUELA

Allies IN Disinformation



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cazadores de
fake news

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Russia AND VENEZUELA ALLIES IN DISINFORMATION

The alliance between Russia and Venezuela transcends the diplomatic realm, the cold headquarters of the United Nations, the military forts where Venezuelan soldiers wield modern Russian weapons and the joint ventures in the oil fields. In terms of propaganda, there is also a joint effort.

Russia not only demonstrates its interest in slowing down the West's advance in Eastern Europe, or what it calls the "near abroad," but also wishes to play a strong role in the area of influence of the United States, i.e. Latin America. Already in 2008, as part of its strategic foreign policy lines, Russia had expressed its intention to give a greater boost to global relations with this part of the world.

The strategic policy document stresses that the Russian Federation will pursue the "development of regional and sub-regional integration in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) area, in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions, in Africa and **Latin America**", given that integration partnerships are becoming increasingly important in the world economy and are emerging as an important factor in regional and sub-regional security, including peacemaking activities" ¹.

This concept was updated in 2013, when Russia's priority countries in Latin America were cited and the topic of "communications" was incorporated as a fundamental area².

Rafael Camargo Lima explains in a journal on NATO strategic communications

(2019)³, that "Strategic communications were integrated into the kind of balancing strategy the Kremlin chose to employ." He adds that "Russia's more aggressive military posture also resulted in more offensive strategic communications, weaponizing the information sphere for military purposes and narratives opposing the West."

In 2008, Russia went to war with Georgia, one of its former republics: Researcher Vladimir Rouvinski points out that "the coverage of the war by the Western media turned the Russian military victory into a defeat in terms of international public opinion"⁴ (p 480).

At the end of that year, then President Dimitri Medvedev arrived in Caracas to participate in the summit of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) and not only expressed his support, but also proposed his country as an associate member of the multilateral entity, made up of leftist nations and led by Havana and Caracas.

Russian communicational support for the interests of leftist governments did not take long. In June 2009, Honduran President José Manuel Zelaya was overthrown and the ALBA diplomatic machinery was set in motion.

In Moscow, the Cuban Embassy organized a meeting of the group's ambassadors to Russia, requesting Russia's contribution to restoring democracy in Honduras. "Perhaps not surprisingly, many Russian media outlets reported on the joint

1.- Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation – 2008 <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>

2.- Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (item 92) <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/in1/>

3.- Camargo Lima, NATO magazine 2019 <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/strategic-communications-as-a-tool-for-great-power-politics-in-venezuela/97>

press conference, as well as on the ALBA Emergency Summit in Managua. The Russia Today news service provided in-depth coverage, from the ALBA perspective, as the story unfolded," notes Rouvinski⁴ (p. 484).

The researcher adds: "It is difficult to judge to what extent the way the mass media in Russia covered the crisis in Honduras could have encouraged Chavez to take a decision that Moscow had been waiting for more than a year: a diplomatic recognition of the territories in Russia's area of influence in the South Caucasus.

In any case, the long-awaited words of 'friend Hugo' were finally expressed, during Chavez's visit to Moscow in September 2009, when the Venezuelan president, 'seizing the opportunity' announced his country's recognition of the territories"⁴ (p. 484).

Russian communicational support for Venezuela's geostrategic interests in 2009 was well received in Caracas and would only be the beginning of collaboration in this area.



4.- ROUVINSKI Vladimir: Rusia y ALBA: ¿Un matrimonio por conveniencia? (Russia and ALBA: A marriage of convenience?) https://www.academia.edu/6848976/Rusia_y_ALBA_Un_matrimonio_por_conveniencia

Telesur: The Communicational Artillery



Venezuela had already promoted the creation of Telesur back in 2005. The initiative was backed by Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Argentina and Uruguay, all with leftist governments. Chávez was convinced of the need to have communicational “artillery” that would help broadcast for a Spanish-speaking audience a different view of the leftist political processes in the world⁵.

The new TV station was first modeled after Qatar’s news network Al Jazeera, with which an agreement was signed in 2006, as Telesur’s first president, Andrés Izarra, admitted at the time of the signing⁶.

A senior journalist at Telesur, who prefers to remain anonymous, explains the reasons why the two networks drifted apart. In 2011, Al Jazeera showed on screen images of Tripoli’s Green Square, supposedly taken over by sectors opposed to Muammar Gaddafi. This had important implications for the development of the conflict in that country. The scenes were later proven to

have been fabricated, which was criticized by Telesur and Russia Today (RT)⁷.

“Al Jazeera was well positioned and had the respect of the Latin American audience. Telesur seeks to assume a position in the Libyan conflict, and it achieved this thanks to this fabricated story by Al Jazeera, which is beginning to lose its position as a benchmark media outlet,” explains the source.

The upshot was a communicational rapprochement with Russia, while the geopolitical and economic interests of Putin and Chávez were increasingly aligned. The former Minister of Communications, Andrés Izarra, who left office in 2012, confirms in an email to this investigation that the rapprochement with Russia Today took place when he no longer had links with Telesur, and while he was there “the relationship was minimal, almost null”.

Our source—who shall remain anonymous—worked until 2014 at Telesur and witnessed the beginnings of the links with RT. “Telesur represented the great link of rapprochement of other countries to reach Latin America. There was not so much a journalistic interest, but an attempt to build a relationship. Thus, Telesur served as a catapult for the penetration of channels such as RT or Arab media such as Al Mayadeen,” he explains.

This source claims that it was striking how RT was able to strategically use Telesur to position itself in terms of political contacts, in the media and to appear as if it were

5.- Hugo Chávez, su Filosofía de la Comunicación y TeleSur (Hugo Chávez, his Communication Philosophy and TeleSur) <http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2016/03/28/hugo-chavez-su-filosofia-de-la-comunicacion-y-telesur/>

6.- Signing of Telesur- Al Jazeera 2006 agreement <https://www.cubaencuentro.com/internacional/noticias/telesur-y-al-jazeera-firman-un-convenio-de-cooperacion-11506>

7.- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URizK4vmxsc>

the great ally of the Latin American news network based in Venezuela. They also explained that Telesur, as compensation, received training courses from RT and, operating as a news agency, provided them with Russian images. “These ties became closer over time,” the source says.

RT in Moscow



In Moscow, Russia Today’s work has a particular dynamic. What seems to be important is not so much the journalistic truth, but the narrative according to the Kremlin’s interests.

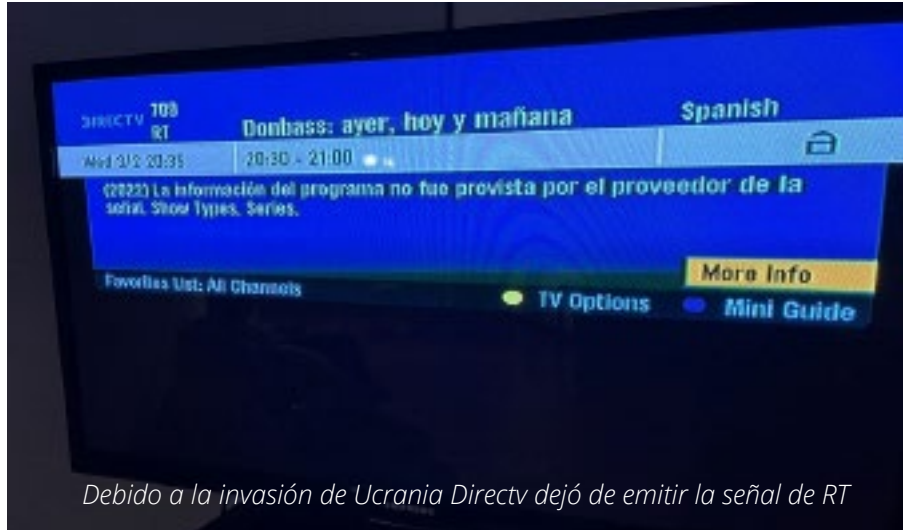
Edgar Espinoza is a Venezuelan who worked at Russia Today offices in Moscow between September 2011 and September 2013, and agreed to collaborate for this investigation from his residence in Spain. He explains that “the governments with an affinity with Vladimir Putin received a better treatment when it came to presenting the news. If something negative happened, they tried to give it a more positive tone, trying to find other experts or analysts to give a perspective that was more favorable to those governments. It happened in the case of Venezuela with Chávez, Maduro and Argentina.”

To get the right news treatment, there was no need for editorial meetings where the news angles were discussed. All they needed was a recruitment and selection policy in order to have the appropriate staff that would follow their interests. “These channels like RT and Sputnik are mostly staffed by people who are not journalists. They are people who demonstrate a certain level of loyalty and allegiance to the government and they are placed in those positions so that nothing gets out of hand, because the priority is to present Russia’s point of view. There are kids who study philology or economics and then learn a little Spanish and are immediately given a job as editors or journalists,” says Espinoza.

He claims that there is a sort of unwritten agreement in the way information is treated, “in which everyone knows that we speak well of countries that are sympathetic to Russia, and not so well of governments that criticize Russia. So, we no longer have to set an editorial line directly, but everyone simply assumes it”.

The Kremlin’s Vision on Venezuelan Screens

In 2014—after Chávez’s death and with Nicolás Maduro in power—Russia invaded Crimea. At that time, Telesur and Russia Today were already aligned with and shared the same narrative of that event.



DUE TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE, DIRECTV STOPPED BROADCASTING THE RT SIGNAL.

A Telesur note on the web says on the subject: “Crimea and Russia have a centuries-old historical and cultural relationship, a fact that was reflected in the result of the 2014 referendum,” which originated Russia’s accession of that territory⁸.

That same year they exchanged material: RT broadcast Oliver Stone’s documentary My Friend Hugo, about Chávez’s life produced by the Latin American network; and Telesur broadcast the Russia-produced program Why, about the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO in 1999.

Russia Today began to broadcast in 2014 on Open Digital Television and through DirecTV, and was later added to the line-up of TV cable company Inter, always in its basic package. To celebrate this achievement, President Nicolás Maduro granted an interview to Eva Golinger,

then RT correspondent in Caracas, in which he noted: “RT is a revolution in the processes of change of the old communicational schemes in the world, such as Telesur”, he stated⁹. He said that RT and Telesur “are like two pillars leading the way of what alternative communication should be”⁹.

More than 90 cable TV operators throughout the country carry Russia Today, Inter having the largest coverage. Simple TV used to offer it on channel 709, but in March 2022 it was taken off the air, as they were not allowed to use American satellites due to the sanctions imposed on the media after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which were complied with by US-based company DirecTV, provider of the signal offered by the Venezuelan cable operator¹⁰.

8.- Telesur and RT criticize Al Jazeera’s editing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URizK4vmxsc>

9.- Maduro highlights the impact of Russia Today in Venezuela (+ Video) <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/12/06/maduro-resalta-impacto-de-russia-today-en-venezuela-video/>

10.- DirecTV plans to drop Russia’s RT America from lineup <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/directv-plans-drop-rt-america-lineup-2022-03-01/>

A 2018 report by the Rand Corporation studies RT's role as part of the Russian propaganda structure¹¹. In 2022, US sanctions supported that piece, just as the European Parliament passed a resolution against the network to prevent "poisonous and harmful disinformation in Europe"¹².

Intergovernmental Agreements

In the area of communications, relations have continued to strengthen. On April¹², 2021, the highest authorities in the field of communication from Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Grenada held an online meeting to discuss joint strategies of ALBA members in that area. In this sense, they agreed "to establish contacts and new collaboration alliances with media from allied countries, such as Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and others, with a view to projecting the achievements of the Alliance in other latitudes and making our realities known at a global level"¹³.

Following these instructions, in October 2021, an inter-ministerial agreement on communications between Russia and Venezuela was signed during the 15th Russia-Venezuela High-Level Commission. At the end of the meeting, Venezuela's Ministry of Communication and Information and Russia's Ministry of

Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of mass communications¹⁴.

In 2022, since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian narratives are replicated in Venezuelan state-run media; with the use of terms such as "special mission" instead of "invasion", stigmatizing the Ukrainian government and leaving out any mention of Ukrainian civilian deaths in news reporting.

Recent analysis shows that RT and Sputnik teamed up with Russian embassies in the Spanish-speaking world to spread Kremlin propaganda. Both Russian state-run media and their diplomatic missions turned to Telegram to promote Putin's justification of the war. These are findings from a study published by the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab in March 2022¹⁵.

Moscow's Replicators and Symbiosis

In Venezuela, the public media have become regular replicators of content produced by Russian platforms. Information pieces from RT in Spanish are regularly used in local newscasts, particularly those of the state-owned Venezolana de Televisión during prime time, with a virtually fixed screen time on channel 8 between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m.,

- 11.- Rand Corporation. The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>
- 12.- European Sanctions to RT <https://www.dw.com/es/qu%C3%A9-sanciones-contra-rusia-entraron-en-vigor/a-60992465>
- 13.- ALBA Agreement on communications. April 2021 <https://www.albatcp.org/acta/comunicacion-e-informacion/>
- 14.- Signing of an inter-ministerial agreement on communications Russia Venezuela <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20211015/rusia-y-venezuela-firman-9-instrumentos-juridicos-para-impulsar-la-cooperacion-bilateral-1117165171.html>
- 15.- RT and Sputnik in Spanish boosted by Russian embassy tweets and suspicious <https://medium.com/dfrlab/rt-and-sputnik-in-spanish-boosted-by-russian-embassy-tweets-and-suspicious-accounts-3a24ded7ef57>

two to three times a week, sharing the time slot with Telesur’s news broadcast. They are also used as a favorite source to display international news events in their own newscasts but using images provided by the Russian platform.

The Venezuelan state-run news channel also uses Russian-made content in opinion programs. For example, in *La Hojilla*, it is common to read headlines taken from the ActualidadRT.com website, at a rate of at least 3 to 5 per broadcast on average, in addition to videos taken from the RT news broadcasts, between June and July 2022¹⁶. Similarly, it is common to include the segment *Ahí les va*¹⁷, which until May of that year was hosted by Inna Afinogenova, who also served as deputy director of the website of the Russian media outlet in Spanish.

Afinogenova was treated by the state-owned media system as a star of “alternative” information. For example, the newspaper *Últimas Noticias*—whose editorial line is in aligned with pro-government narrative—even described her in November 2020 as an “empress” in a piece on the impact of the commentator on the discussion about the Sputnik V vaccine¹⁸.

On the other hand, several state-owned media outlets broadcast Russian content of different types, adapted to the contents announced in their programming. For example, public-access state-run channels

VTV, TVes, Vive TV and Conciencia TV, as well as TVepaco—aligned with pro-government editorial lines—have broadcasted emblematic non-news RT programs such as *La Lista de Erick* (on tourism, with episodes recorded in Venezuela), *Conversando con Correa* (with the former Ecuadorian president), *Tecnología en punta*, *El Zoom* and *Los Fixis*, an animated children’s series.

Narrative and Political Links

Venezuelan state-run station VTV has not only replicated the Russian content, but also use the narratives in their newscasts and news programs, thus stigmatizing nations with liberal democracies and whose governments are not considered allies, but above all they attack the main common enemy: the United States, which they present as an imperialist, racist nation, exploitative of the poorest nations, while Russia and its allies are part of the progressive forces that advocate for the rights of the working classes.

With Telesur, the joint work led to the production of a joint program with Russia Today, called *Venezuela y Rusia en la mira* (Venezuela and Russia in the spotlight). “In the first episode of their joint project, RT and Telesur, with the help of renowned international analysts, reveal the other side of the debate, presenting information concealed by large media corporations to dispel the “information intoxication” spread

16.- VTV’s *La Hojilla*, July 2, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsKm9xIk5Vk>

17.- VTV’s *La Hojilla*, April 24, 2021. Minute 36:54. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWEfXwPfmQo>

18.- Inna, la “emperatriz” que se puso la vacuna rusa (Inna, the “empress” who received the Russian vaccine) <https://ultimasnoticias.com.ve/noticias/historias/inna-la-emperatriz-que-se-puso-la-vacuna-rusa/>

19.- *La lista de Erick: Caracas, la ciudad de la eterna primavera* (Erick’s List: Caracas, the city of eternal springtime) https://actualidad.rt.com/programas/la_lista_de_erick/397944-caracas-ciudad-eterna-primavera

by the West against Russia and Venezuela”, said the promotional clip of the program²⁰.

The relationship between the Venezuelan government and RT has been evident not only on screen. In the last five years, the faces of the news from Caracas on that channel have been journalists Jessica Sosa and Érika Ortega Sanoja, both former staff of Venezolana de Televisión and Radio Nacional de Venezuela.

Ortega Sanoja was elected as alternate deputy for the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela in 2015. In 2016, she was appointed correspondent in Venezuela for RT, without publicly disclosing her resignation from parliamentary representation. Then her profile was published on the website of the Russian channel where she stated: “Practicing journalism in this important channel is to be part, as the Liberator Simón Bolívar used to say, of the ‘artillery of thought’”²¹.

RT’s broadcasts from Caracas are mainly produced at Telesur’s headquarters in the Venezuelan capital.

Wartime Disinformation

On February 24, 2022, Russia formally launched a long-feared military operation in Ukraine—a former Soviet republic with a pro-Western government—with the alleged aim of “defending” the Russian ethnic minority in that country, according to Vladimir Putin.

Since then, the communicational apparatus of the Venezuelan State has been at the service of the propaganda directed by the Kremlin, or any messages that benefit its war efforts.

On the first day of the invasion, Freddy Nájñez, Minister of Information of the Maduro administration, posted a series of messages that replicated the propaganda talking points of the Russian narrative on the military operation on Ukrainian territory, as part of a post thread on his Twitter account @luchaalmada²². He stated: “This military operation poses no threat to the civilian population of that country.”

That same day, the Spanish website *El País* published that “civilian casualties (in Ukraine) have reached thirty, according to data from news agency Efe: four civilians have died in an attack in the Donetsk region and at least²² in a Russian air attack in the Odessa region, on the shores of the Black Sea”²³.

The Venezuelan minister also tweeted that “the goal of the operation is to protect people who have been under the abuse and genocide by the neo-Nazi regime for eight years”²⁴. The term “neo-Nazi” was used by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his speeches to justify the invasion and was repeated by pro-Russian media.

Nájñez also posted that “Ukrainian border guards offer no resistance to Russian

20.- Start of joint transmission of the program “Venezuela y Rusia en la mira” 2015 <https://actualidad.rt.com/programas/venezuela-y-rusia-en-la-mira/170628-rt-telesur-programa-intoxicacion-informativa-occidente>

21.- Profile of Érika Ortega Sanoja on the RT in Spanish website, 2016 (Archive) <https://web.archive.org/web/20161026231720/https://actualidad.rt.com/equipo/view/205904-erika-sanoja>

22.- Freddy Nájñez Twitter posts on Russian “military operation” in Ukraine. <https://twitter.com/luchaalmada/status/1496847074805096451>

23.- El País: At least 20 civilians killed in Russian shelling in Donbas, says Kiev <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-16/guerra-ucrania-rusia-ultima-hora-en-directo.html>

24.- Does Russia’s military operation pose “no threat” to Ukraine’s civilian population, as Maduro’s minister tweeted? <https://espaja.com/fact-checking/la-operacion-militar-de-rusia-no-representa-ninguna-amenaza-para-la-poblacion-civil-de-ucrania-como-tuiteo-freddy-nanez>

troops. This is an unclear transcript of Russian Defense Ministry news reports taken from the official RT Spanish-language media²⁵. On February 26, the official replicated false claims that Zelensky pledged to annihilate pro-Russians in his country²⁶.

Ñáñez is not the only high-level official who has taken on such a spokesperson role. The Anti-blockade vice minister William Castillo retweeted on March 1 a video published by Katu Arkonada, a Telesur collaborator, showing a Nazi flag waving in a trench, as if it were a current event, but the video has actually been on the internet at least since 2020²⁷.

On March 15, University Education Minister Tibisay Lucena said that she had seen videos of “pregnant women trying to save themselves from a bloody Russian bombardment and then go model for a renowned brand,” in reference to the image of a woman with blankets on her arms and injuries on her face, during the evacuation process of the mother and child hospital in Mariupol, Ukraine, after the Russian attack on that facility on March 9. Thus, Lucena also replicated fake news²⁸.

Russian Sources in Numbers

As mentioned above, information produced by Russian media is used as a

prominent source. Several news websites aligned with the Venezuelan government regularly quote or reproduce articles published by RT and Sputnik, the two Russian propaganda media outlets with the greatest penetration in Latin America, and since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the number of articles citing these Kremlin-aligned sources has increased considerably.

To evaluate the influence of Sputnik and RT in the national information ecosystem with numbers, *Cazadores de Fake News* identified and analyzed publications on Venezuelan media websites that explicitly quoted, at least once, content produced by either of these two Russian outlets.

They analyzed articles published between January 1, 2019 and May 30, 2022 and established three study phases:

- **Phase 1, Pre-pandemic:** between January 1, 2019 and December 31, 2019 (the day the first COVID-19 pandemic-related article was identified).
- **Phase 2, Pandemic:** between January 1, 2020 and February 15, 2022 (the day the first article related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was identified).
- **Phase 3, Invasion:** between February 16, 2022 and May 30, 2022.

- 25.- RT en Español: Los guardias fronterizos ucranianos no oponen resistencia a las tropas de Rusia, afirmaron desde el Ministerio (Ukrainian border guards do not put up any resistance to Russian troops, the Ministry said.) <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/421205-ministerio-defensa-ruso-instalaciones-defensa-ucrania-inhabilitadas>
- 26.- ¿El presidente de Ucrania hizo un violento spot de campaña como tuiteó el ministro de información de Maduro? (Did Ukraine’s president make a violent campaign spot as Maduro’s information minister tweeted?) <https://espaja.com/verifications/el-presidente-de-ucrania-hizo-un-violento-spot-de-campana-como-asegura-el-ministro-de-informacion-de-maduro>
- 27.- ¿Bandera nazi ondeó en una trinchera de Ucrania en 2022, como sugiere un video retuiteado por William Castillo? (Was a Nazi flag waving in a Ukrainian trench in 2022, as a video retweeted by William Castillo suggests?) <https://espaja.com/verifications/bandera-nazi-ondeo-en-una-trinchera-de-ucrania-en-2022-como-sugiere-un-video-retuiteado-por-william-castillo>
- 28.- ¿Ucraniana embarazada que salió herida tras bombardeo ruso es un montaje, como dijo Tibisay Lucena? (Was the pregnant Ukrainian woman injured after Russian bombing a set-up, as Tibisay Lucena said?) <https://espaja.com/fact-checking/ucraniana-embarazada-que-salio-herida-tras-bombardeo-ruso-es-un-montaje-como-dijo-tibisay-lucena>

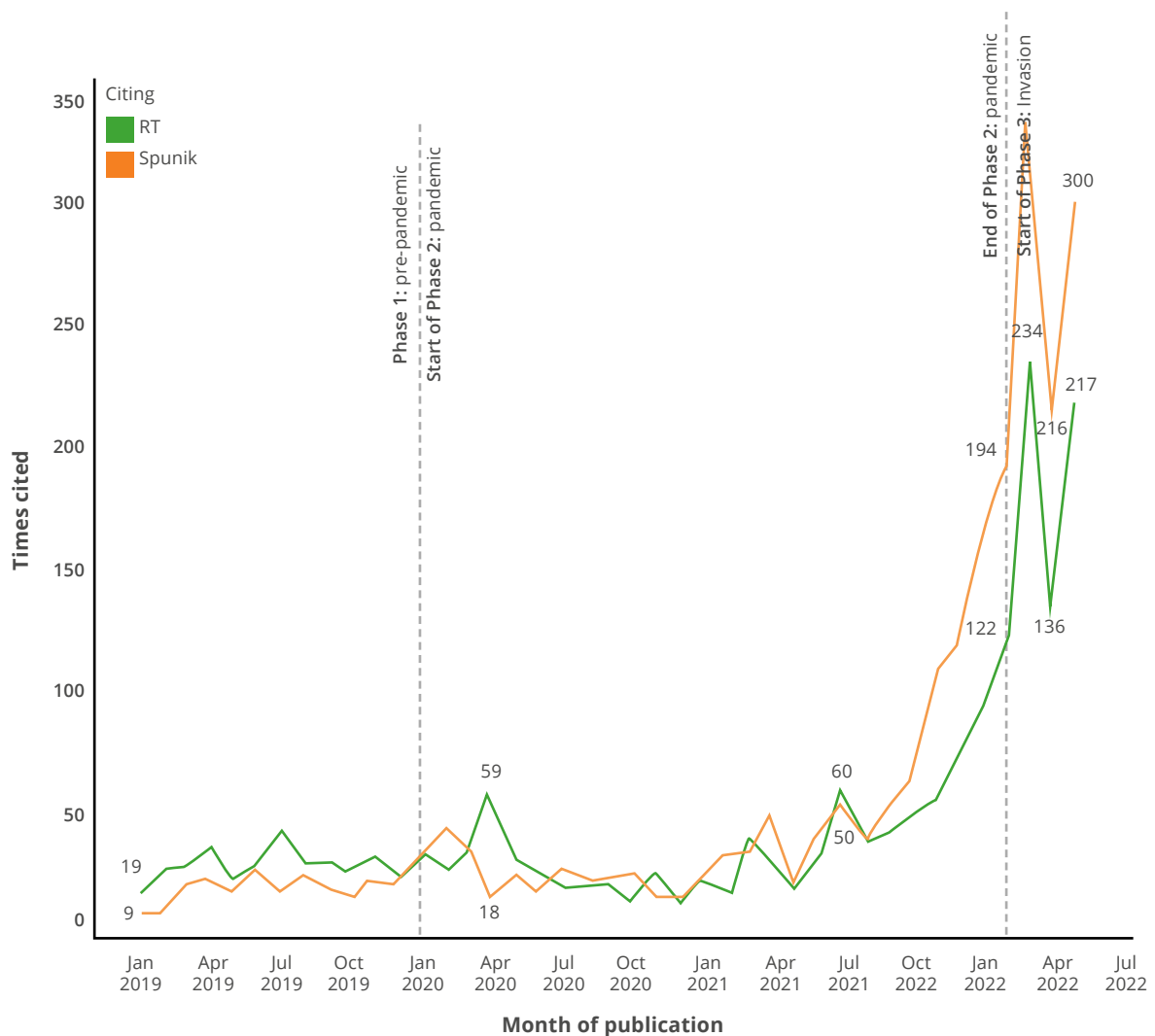
During the entire period studied, a total of 4,522 articles indexed by Google were identified, published by eight news sites controlled by Chavismo. Among them, 4,402 articles (97.3%) were published by only five media outlets:

- Telesur (telesurtv.net)
- Venezolana de Televisión (vtv.gob.ve)
- La Iguana (laiguana.tv)

- Últimas Noticias (ultimasnoticias.com.ve)
- Agencia Venezuela News (venezuela-news.com)²⁹

Sputnik was cited at least once in 2,413 different publications, and RT at least once in 1,989 of the 4,402 articles evaluated.

Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik, by agency cited



29.- The study was limited to the evaluation of the content published by these five media outlets, since they replicate Sputnik's and RT's narratives in Venezuela most regularly. The information on cited pieces was simplified to only the first quote made in each article, and limited only to RT and Sputnik. However, some of the publications contained more than one Russian media outlet cited: In some cases, RT and Sputnik were mentioned simultaneously; in others, other Russian media outlets such as TASS and RIA Novosti were mentioned.

Sputnik and RT were cited in the Venezuelan media under study somewhat regularly from January 2019 to July 2021. During this period, considering the five media outlets as a whole, an average of 29.7 monthly RT quotes and 26.1 monthly Sputnik quotes were detected.

This monthly number of pieces citing Russian media began to increase in July 2021, peaking in March 2022, when the five Venezuelan websites together published 331 articles citing Sputnik and 234 citing RT.

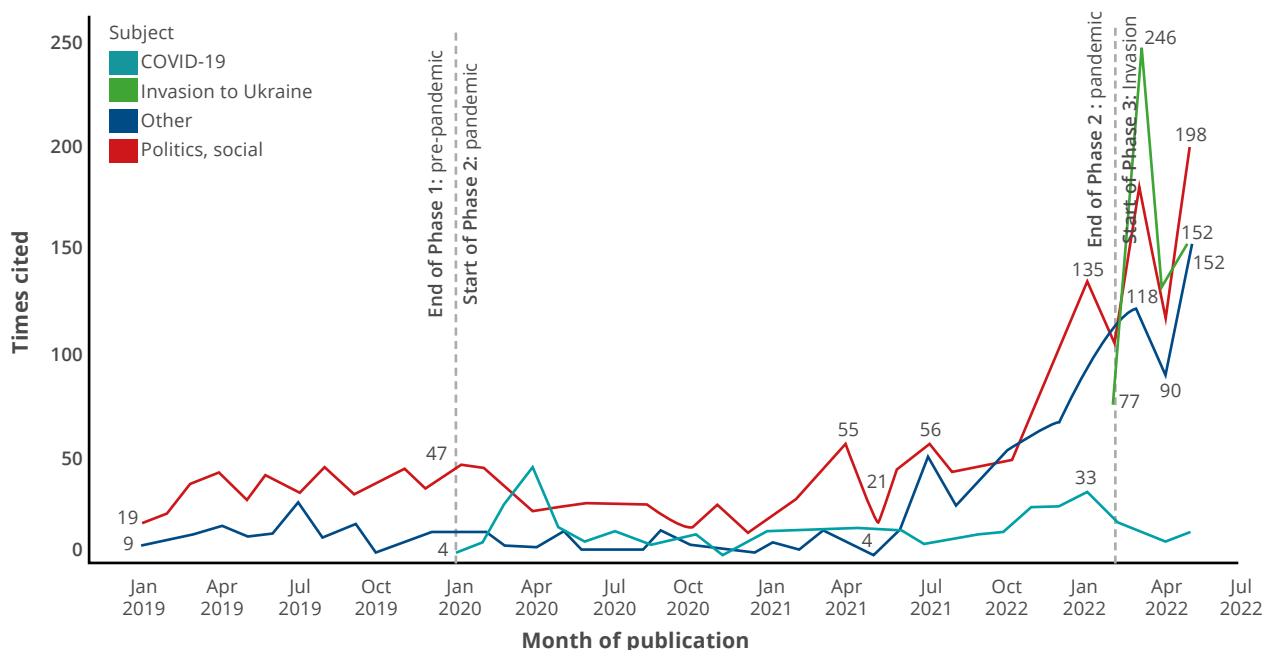
Distribution by subject

Considering the subject matter of the articles published in the five selected national media outlets, citing Sputnik and RT, four categories were defined:

- **Articles on COVID-19:** related to the discovery and progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, policies to control the spread of the virus, vaccines, treatments and the impact of the pandemic around the world.

- **Articles on the invasion of Ukraine:** published since February 16, 2022 and related to the invasion of Ukraine: political statements and narratives of the Russian government, progress of the conflict, phase of negotiations and related economic impacts.
- **Articles on political and social issues:** issues not related to the COVID-19 pandemic or the invasion of Ukraine, highly influenced by the editorial line of Russian media, including protests, war conflicts, events, among others.
- **Others:** include various reports with little influence from the editorial line of the Russian media: natural catastrophes (earthquakes, hurricanes), space exploration, articles on health, food, ecological issues, among others.

Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik, **by subject**



Articles in the COVID-19 category are consistently cited by national media since the beginning of 2020 until the end of the study. Overall, national websites mentioned a monthly average of 16.2 articles citing Sputnik or RT during this period.

In the rest of the categories, there is an increase in the number of texts quoted since July 2021—three months after the meeting of the ALBA Ministries of Communications and three months before the signing of the Russia-Venezuela inter-ministerial agreement on communications—with the number of articles cited on the categories Invasion of Ukraine and on Political and Social issues soaring in early 2022.

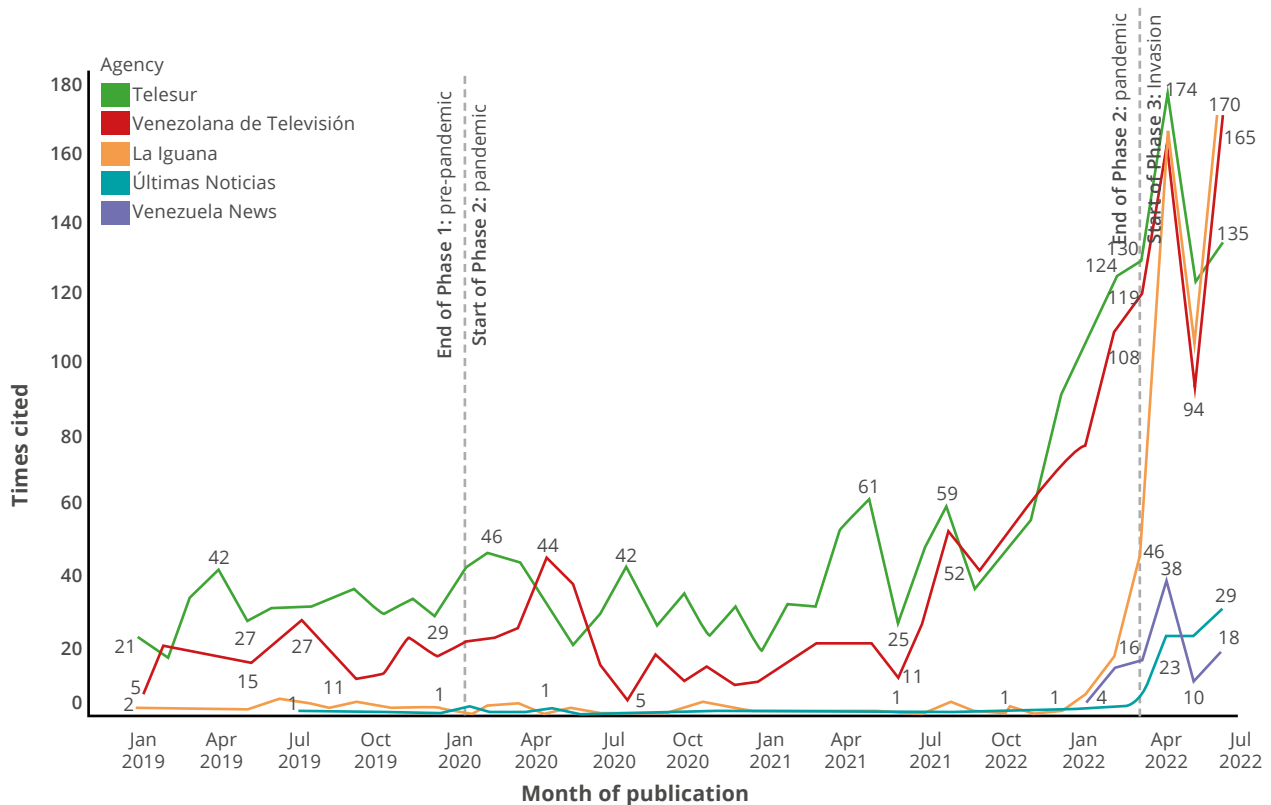
During 2022, Venezuelan media published 1,343 articles on the Invasion in Ukraine or on Political and Social issues, citing Sputnik and RT.

Distribution by national media

Among the five Venezuelan media outlets studied, Telesur leads in the number of articles published citing the two Russian news agencies (2076 articles), followed by Venezolana de Televisión (1562 articles), La Iguana (561 articles), Últimas Noticias (104 articles) and Venezuela News (99 articles).

The number of articles published monthly quoting Sputnik and RT by Telesur and Venezolana de Televisión increased notably since July 2021 and skyrocketed since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. La Iguana, Últimas Noticias and Venezuela News also cited an increasing number of articles from Russian media since the beginning of the invasion:

Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik, by agency



Comparing the three periods studied, there is a sustained upsurge in the monthly number of quoted pieces from Sputnik and RT by the Venezuelan media outlet evaluated.

During Phase 2 (pandemic, before the invasion of Ukraine), Telesur, Venezolana de Televisión and Últimas Noticias had already raised 1.5 to 2 times the number of articles published citing Russian media, compared to Phase 1 (pre-pandemic).

Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine (Phase 3), all the media outlets studied increased at least three-fold the number of pieces citing Sputnik and RT.

La Iguana saw the largest surge in articles quoting Russian media since February 2022, publishing 50 times more articles with mentions of Sputnik and RT than it did between January 2020 and February 2022.

Overall, the five news agencies studied raised on average 5.5 times the number of articles citing Sputnik and RT since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, compared to the number of mentions made since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.



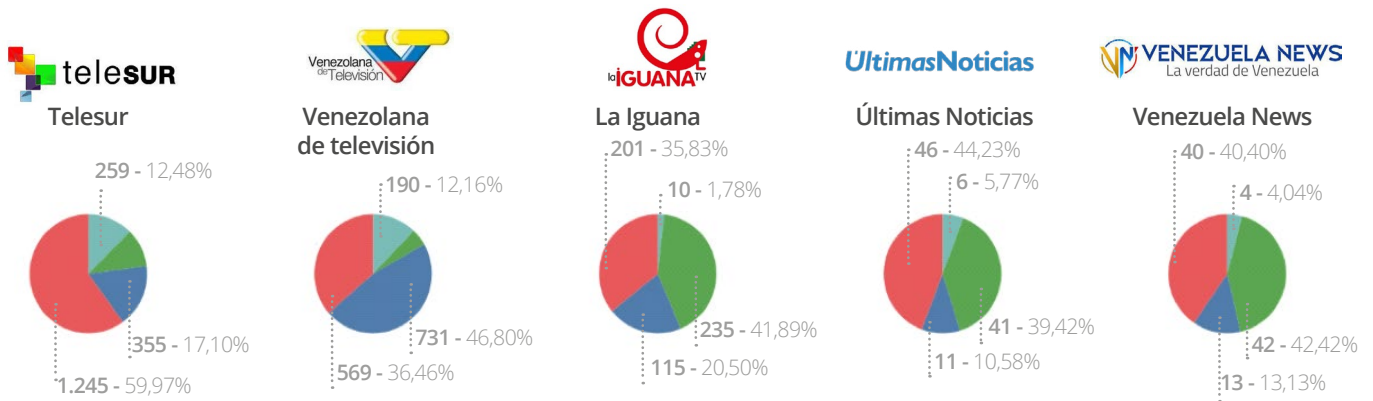
During the entire period studied, between 82 and 93% of the articles with citations to Sputnik and RT published by Telesur, La Iguana, Últimas Noticias or Venezuela News, were related to political, social content or the invasion of Ukraine.

On these issues, Telesur published 422 articles with quotes from Sputnik and RT, followed by 403 published by La Iguana and 192 published by Venezolana de Televisión.

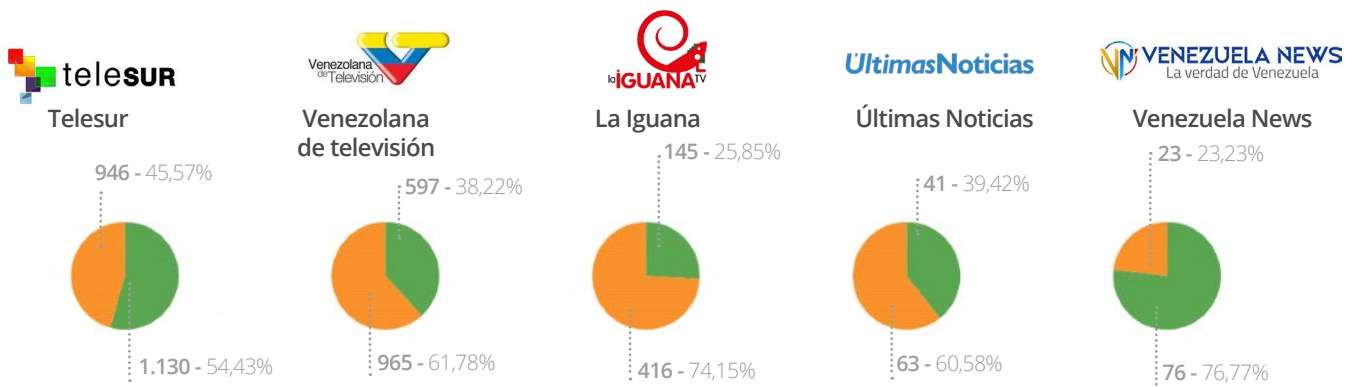
	Phase 1: Pre-pandemic from 01/01/19 to 12/31/19		Phase 2: Pandemic from 01/01/2020 to 02/14/2022			Phase 3: Invasion to Ukraine from 15/02/2022 to 05/30/2022		
	Mentions	Mentions/mo.	Mentions	Mentions/mo.	Diff.	Mentions	Mentions/mo.	Diff.
Telesur	361	30.08	1204	47.2	x 1.57	511	146	x 3.09
VTV	206	17.17	862	33.8	x 1.97	494	141.14	x 4.18
La Iguana	27	2.25	62	2.43	x 1.08	472	134.86	x 55.5
Últimas Noticias	4	0.33	22	0.86	x 2.60	78	22.28	x 25.91
Venezuela News	-	-	19	0.74	-	80	22.86	x 30.89
TOTAL	598	49.83	2169	85.03	x 1.70	1635	467.14	x 5.49

Subject:
 COVID-19
 Invasion to Ukraine
 Other
 Politics, social

Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik, by subject



Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik, by agency cited



Sputnik is the Russian media with the highest number of articles cited, during the period under study, by Venezolana de Televisión (61.78% of the total number of citations to Sputnik or RT of the media), La Iguana (74.15%) and Últimas Noticias (60.58%). RT was mentioned in 54.43% of the articles published by Telesur and in 76.77% of the articles published by Venezuela News, which had citations to either of the two Russian media.

Contents guide

In addition to the action of official spokespersons or the digital broadcasting apparatus of the government of Nicolás Maduro, the state media have received specific instructions on how to deal with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, through messages sent via the WhatsApp platform to members of their editorial staffs.

The EsPaja.com team received from a confidential source, a member of the state- owned Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, a message forwarded on March 2, 2022 stating that the sender was “the boss”.

The instructions sent to journalist staff stated that the editorial guideline must “dismantle the anti-Russian matrices,” that “Venezuela is not impartial”, that they must follow “the official messages from the Russian Ministry of Defense and by

President Putin,” and emphasizing that it is not an invasion of Ukraine but “special operations to protect the population from the genocide of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi government”, with particular emphasis on the adjective “neo-Nazi”.

Instructions issued by the Ministry of Information and Communications to journalists working in the state-run media outlet on the treatment of information related to the war in Ukraine

- 1) Regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in accordance with the position of the Venezuelan State, our editorial line must dismantle the anti-Russian trends.
- 2) There is a silent advance of NATO against this allied nation, which intensified after the coup d'état in Ukraine.
- 3) Venezuela is not impartial, since we have been under attack for 20 years by the same NATO actors (USA and EU).
- 4) Watch regularly for official statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense and President Putin.
- 5) Stay vigilant. Neither our information agenda nor the terms or glossaries can be dictated by NATO.
- 6) **There is no invasion of Ukraine. Special operations were launched to protect the population from the genocide of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi government.**
- 7) It is important to define it as neo-Nazi.

Noteworthy is the recent coverage of the self-styled “news agency” Venezuela News. Officially, it does not belong to the state-run media structure, but it is made up of journalists from VTV’s staff and the advertising on the web is exclusively from state-owned companies.

Pedro Carvajalino, a communications agent of the ruling party and anchor of the program Zurda Konducta on VTV, traveled to Russia in June 2022, together with journalist Lucía Córdova, former member of VTV and Telesur, to report from the area.



Online support

The communicational strategy of the Venezuelan State regarding the conflict in Ukraine is part of Nicolás Maduro’s “total support” to Vladimir Putin, announced on February 22 in a televised speech and through social media³⁰. This was demonstrated on the web on March 1, after a telephone call between both presidents in which they discussed how

to “boost the alliance and Venezuela’s strategic support to Russia”, as recorded by the digital observatory ProBox³¹.

As a reference, ProBox recorded between February 22 and 26, 2022 the first nine Twitter tags on the Ukraine-Russia conflict as trending on Twitter in Venezuela, with a clearly differentiated organic behavior compared to the trend after Maduro declared his “total support” to Moscow.

Date	Trend	Sub-category	Tweets, apprx.	Users, apprx.	Non-organic behavior avg.
02/22/2022	#Ucrania	International	22.957	14.490	4.63%
02/24/2022	#UcraniaRusia	International	39.577	31.750	0.35%
02/24/2022	#RussiaUkraineConflict	International	294.181	192.157	3.93%
02/24/2022	#Ucrania	International	340.000	19.279	3.63%
02/24/2022	#Rusia	International	250.000	13.382	2.64%
02/24/2022	#ThirdWorldWar	International	400.000	10.179	2.07%
02/25/2022	#TerceraGuerraMundial	International	245.000	44.345	10.63%
02/26/2022	#StandWithUkraine	International	560.000	165.482	3.48%
02/26/2022	#UcraniaRusia	International	70.000	39.821	3.16%

According to the report, exactly one week after Maduro’s announcement, the “Radical pro-government” movement—a category determined by ProBox of accounts aligned with the pro-ruling-party discourse—positioned the hashtag [#EEUUIrrespetu](#) (USA disrespects) on Twitter, reaching approximately 38,000 messages dubbing as “hypocrisy” the US position on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. According to the analysis, at least 52.56% of the tweets were possibly posted from bots or fake accounts.

On March 1, the Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPCI) promoted [#VenezuelaConRusia](#) (Venezuela with Russia) as the second most trending hashtag of the day.



30.- Nicolás Maduro: “All the support to President Putin and his people”. <https://twitter.com/nicolasmaduro/status/1496324985048215558>

31.- Maduro expresses support to Russia’s Twitter propaganda in Venezuela <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/maduro-extiende-su-apoyo-a-la-propaganda-de-rusia-en-twitter-en-venezuela>

On March 2, several pro-government entities positioned this hashtag as a trend, mainly from Venezolana de Televisión's Twitter account with around 4,105 tweets. Most of the messages were not related to the conflict and at least 42.95% were possibly posted by bots or accounts with inauthentic behavior.

On that day, MIPPCI positioned #VenezuelaApuestaALaPaz (Venezuela supports Peace) with around 240,000 tweets condemning "the disinformation campaign promoted by Western countries against Russia". At least 68.43% of these messages were generated by accounts with inauthentic behavior.

On March 10, the Russian ambassador to Venezuela posted on his Twitter account a message about a "high-level meeting" with Delcy Rodríguez—vice-president of the Maduro regime—in Turkey with the foreign minister of that country within the framework of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. In said forum, Rodríguez referred to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, prompting MIPPCI to post #DiálogoEsReconciliación (Dialogue is Reconciliation) on March 11 with images of the meeting, generating approximately 290,000 messages, 72.85% of which were made by accounts with possible inauthentic behavior.

On March 13, MIPPCI positioned the trend #DiplomaciaBolivariana (Bolivarian Diplomacy) mentioning Delcy Rodríguez's remarks at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, with at least 300,000 tweets of which approximately 76.94% were made by possible bots.

Before the wartime information, Russia was a protagonist of digital propaganda on healthcare and COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, pro-government discourse dominated the conversation about vaccines: While civil society demanded the importation of vaccines and massive vaccination campaigns all around the country, generating on average 6,011 tweets per trend (example: #VacunasYaParaTodos (Vaccines for All Now) on April 11, 2021 with 42,071 tweets); the pro-government apparatus promoted the Russian Sputnik V vaccine generating on average 488,377 tweets per trend.

In total, 21 local trends with content about Russia were recorded in 2021, of which only one was informative about the arrival of the third batch of Sputnik V vaccines in the country. In addition, the other 20 trends were intentionally positioned by the *Oficialismo*, with approximately 7,376,983 tweets. However, this content was not organic, as some 62% of tweets were posted by possible bots or accounts with inauthentic behavior.

Up to June 2022, 19 trends on Russia's invasion of Ukraine were recorded in Venezuela: 6 were promoted by the pro-government machine, all in support of the Russian government, with 1,072,105 tweets, and with an average inorganic behavior of 61.88%.

Russia and Venezuela's attempts to influence and manipulate social media already had an important precedent. The 2019 protests in Chile against the

government of Sebastián Piñera had given clues about a possible joint work between these regimes, in this case to destabilize an ideological adversary.

A study carried out by the Chilean government found that many of the messages that were disseminated through social media during the nationwide demonstrations came from Moscow and Caracas.

The study, published by Chile's La Tercera, explains that 43,129 tweets came from Venezuela, boosting hashtags such as #RenunciaPiñera (Resign Piñera). It adds that “out of ten tweets posted from outside Chile, approximately six come from Venezuela”. Furthermore, a random sample of tweets show accounts with abnormal behavior, e.g. recently created accounts, or older accounts but with non-regular usage, and others used only to spread information related to the Chilean situation³¹.

This joint propaganda effort was detected in an Oxford University study, titled *The Global Disinformation Order 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*³², where Russia and Venezuela, in addition to China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, were singled out as the leaders in the use of Twitter and Facebook to conduct foreign influence operations.

Venezuela as seen by a media outlet in Moscow

If we were to browse the print media—or a news website—in a city like Moscow, what would we find about Venezuela?

Since the invasion of Ukraine (02/24/2022), a law forbids Russian media to use the terms “war”, “aggression” or “invasion” instead of the official term “special military operation” (The New Yorker, 03/04/2022)³³. Whoever fails to follow the governmental discourse faces accusations of spreading “fake news” and sentences of up to 15 years in prison.

The news website Lenta.ru (“tape”) gives us an idea of what a “middle-of-the-road” media outlet is in Vladimir Putin’s Russia. It is one of the most popular news sites and has some 600,000 visitors per day in a country of some 144 million inhabitants. Almost half of its *staff* resigned or was fired in 2014, after the media was acquired by an oligarch close to Putin (Alexander Mamut), and still, it experienced episodes of official censorship after the invasion of Ukraine³⁴.

Lenta has six entries on Venezuela (Венесуэла) since June 2021³⁵, some of them not precisely favorable to Maduro’s government, e.g., a complaint by the Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences about environmental destruction by PDVSA on 02/18/2022³⁶.

31.- Chile traces role of Venezuelans <https://www.latercera.com/nacional/noticia/gobierno-rastrea-rol-venezolanos-twitter/880408/>

32.- The World Disinformation Order 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Network Manipulation. Oxford University <https://demotech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

33.- The war that Russians do not want to see <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/03/14/the-war-that-russians-do-not-see>

34.- Censorship against Lenta after the invasion of Ukraine <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/09/lenta-ru-briefly-filled-with-anti-war-anti-putin-content>

35.- Entries on Venezuela in Lenta <https://lenta.ru/search?query=venezuela#size=10|sort=2|domain=1|modified,format=yyyy-MM-dd>

36.- Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences condemned for environmental destruction by PDVSA, on Lenta <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/02/18/venes/>

An alleged Lenta “critical report” on Venezuela, “Oil Curse” (signed by Victoria Kondrátieva, 6/24/2022)³⁷, is part of a series on countries affected by U.S. sanctions. Although the article criticizes the country’s “dependence on oil exports” and some of the economic policies of Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro, it is full of inaccuracies, biased views and half-truths about the recent history of the South American country.

“In the 1990s, important oligarchs shared power in Venezuela. Even then, the economy depended heavily on extraction of commodities, and all revenues from oil sales were divided among the political elites. Corruption and nepotism flourished in the country, social stratification was monstrous, average citizens were poor. The situation began to change when the charismatic Hugo Chávez was elected President in 1998”, reads one of the paragraphs.

Vchernaya Moskva (“The Evening”) is not directly financed by Vladimir Putin’s regime, but by the regional government of the city of Moscow (since 2011), and is probably the most popular printed evening newspaper in the capital. The website has published no entries on Venezuela since December 2019. In the political events of that year, amid the little news coverage about the distant tropical country, it showed an editorial line aligned with the interests of the Maduro administration.

For example, to analyze the US sanctions, it turned to a pro-Maduro Russian political scientist as a source (01/29/2014)³⁸, without mentioning any other aspects of the national situation.

The official media outlet Rossiyskaya Gazeta (“Russian Gazette”) is similar to the Official Gazette in Venezuela, although it also publishes general information. Since 2021, it has published five entries on Venezuela: interestingly, two of them were obituaries of people from the culture and entertainment world, dancer and dance teacher Nina Novak and entertainer Josemith Bermudez. In January 2021, it highlighted that the military alliance with Russia had turned the Venezuelan Aviation into “the strongest in the region” (01/26/2021)³⁹, and in May 2020 the Russian anti-aircraft systems deployed on the island of La Orchila “designed to protect Iranian oil tankers from a possible seizure by the United States” (05/23/2020)⁴⁰.

Tass is Russia’s official news agency, and its website has an English-language version. It meticulously records diplomatic statements on the Russia-Venezuela bilateral relationship⁴¹, and on any given day, for example July 4, 2022, it may contain up to eight pieces related to Venezuela, including an article on the “unbeatable” Sukhoi fighter jets⁴², commercial agreements between the two countries⁴³ - such as space cooperation⁴⁴ -

37.- “Oil curse” Victoria Kondrátieva, Lenta, 24/06/2022 <https://lenta.ru/articles/2022/06/24/venezuela/>

38.- Review of U.S. sanctions against Venezuela, on VM.ru <https://vm.ru/news/692413-politolog-prokommentiroval-vvedenie-sankcij-ssha-protiv-venesuely>

39.- Impact for Venezuela of the military alliance with Russia <https://rg.ru/2021/01/26/rossijskie-samolety-i-zrk-sdelali-vvs-venesuely-silnejshimi-v-regione.html>

40.- Russian anti-aircraft systems in La Orchila <https://rg.ru/2020/05/23/ispytaniia-buka-i-smercha-v-venesuely-pokazali-na-video.html>

41.- Russia-Venezuela diplomatic statements, reported by Tass. <https://tass.com/search?searchStr=venezuela&sort=date>

42.- The unmatched Sukhoi combat aircraft <https://tass.com/defense/1475281>

43.- The Russia-Venezuela trade agreements <https://tass.com/economy/147535556>

44.- Special Russia-Venezuela Cooperation <https://tass.com/politics/1475409>

the opening of weekly flights⁴⁵ and mutual appreciation for the support in a hostile Western environment⁴⁶.

A search for the words “Venezuela” and “human rights”—Nicolás Maduro’s regime is under investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court for violation of fundamental rights—in the Tass agency shows only results from May 2019 from an unofficial source: a complaint by activists about arbitrary arrests during demonstrations that year (05/25/2019).⁴⁷

Other than that, there are pieces on the “violation of human rights” of Alex Saab, economic operator of the Maduro regime prosecuted in the USA (11/08/2021) 48, or of the effects of Washington’s sanctions on the rights of the people of countries such as Venezuela⁴⁹.

The renowned Izvestia (“Herald”), which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2017, was at one time the great national daily newspaper—obviously aligned with pro-government discourse—in the Soviet Union. After its dissolution in 1991, Izvestia reinvented itself as an independent media outlet with a liberal line that became internationally renowned in the 1990s.

To survive in the context of growing authoritarianism, the media assumed a position increasingly aligned with the Kremlin, and after it was purchased by the National Media Group (2008), another conglomerate linked to oligarchic interests, it could now be defined as a carrier of extremist positions in favor of Putin—and his international interests. Izvestia supported the Maduro regime’s public theory that the March 7, 2019 “mega-blackout” in Venezuela had been caused by a U.S. cyber-attack⁵⁰.

Igor Pshenichnikov’s writing says: *“All these ‘tear-jerking’ articles and twitter posts about the lack of electricity in hospitals and even about the ‘death of 79 patients,’ as reported by Senator Rubio (US Senator Marco Rubio), turned out to be false (...) all hospitals in the country, on the initiative of President Maduro, were previously equipped with backup power generators. Not a single hospital was left without electricity and, consequently, no one died.”*

Other papers referred to the swearing in of Juan Guaidó as “Interim President” stating that *“a possible change of power in Venezuela could turn into a civil war with the subsequent introduction of peacekeepers”*⁵¹, while others considered scenarios of a hypothetical U.S. military invasion of Venezuela, even with the intervention of nuclear submarines⁵².

45.- Moscow, Caracas to introduce weekly flights
<https://tass.com/economy/1475505>

46.- Mutual thanks for the support in a “hostile western environment”
<https://tass.com/world/1475297>

47.- Activists condemn arbitrary arrests in protests
<https://tass.com/world/1041723>

48.- “Violation of Alex Saab’s human rights” <https://tass.com/world/1358827>

49.- Effects of Washington’s sanctions on the rights of citizens of countries such as Venezuela <https://tass.com/world/1262913>

50.- “A U.S. cyberattack left Venezuela without electricity”
<https://iz.ru/854516/igor-pshenichnikov/szhit-prekrasno-kiberataka-iz-ssha-ostavila-venesuolu-bez-sveta>

51.- Izvestia reviews Guaidó’s swearing-in
<https://iz.ru/837336/nataliia-portiakova/podem-s-perevorotom-kak-u-venesuoly-poiavilsia-eshche-odin-prezident>

52.- “We are going to Maracaibo: US will launch a military campaign against Venezuela”,
<https://iz.ru/840921/aleksandr-ermakov/my-idem-na-marakaibo-nachnut-li-ssha-voennuiu-kampaniiu-protiv-venesuoly>

CONCLUSIONS

The common interests between Vladimir Putin's Russia and Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela have fostered an alliance that has transcended economic, military, political and social agreements. The dissemination of propaganda is a novel field of bi-national integration.

As part of this joint work, Venezuelan state-owned and pro-government media have given space in their grids to Russian-invoiced content aligned with Putin. In addition, they have embraced Russian speeches in their unconventional confrontation with the West, making Russia look like a reliable ally.

In the digital field, there is an evident use of cybertroops (bots) in Venezuela to position trends favorable to Russian rhetoric. Furthermore, in Russian media, references to Venezuela clearly promote an image favorable to Nicolás Maduro's regime.

Authoritarian LEARNING tools FOR ACTION

María Virginia Marín Vazquez - Probox VE

In countries under authoritarian contexts, where traditional media are censored, those who try to tell a different version than the “official” are regularly and constantly persecuted. Social networks have become a fundamental space for freedom of expression, social organization and the construction of public opinion.

Maduro’s regime in Venezuela, as in Cuba and Nicaragua, is very clear about how necessary the Internet is for the relationship and development of citizens. For this reason, for years it has deployed mechanisms to control and/or contaminate online information, managing to influence and even inorganically alter the conversation in social networks.

Inspired by the style of its Russian allies, where censorship and limitations to freedom of expression online are applied in a “soft” version, compared to what happens in China for example; the Venezuelan government (intelligently) executes the control over information in other ways:

- It invests less and less “public” resources in improvements, technological development expansions and even maintenance to the platforms that provide Internet service in the country. “I didn’t take away your Internet, it’s just that there is a bad connection” is part of the state design.
- “Partial” censorship of the Internet is applied mainly to websites of independent media or organizations in defense of Human Rights. “I don’t block you from seeing everything, I just prevent you from accessing what I don’t want you to see”.
- Influence and disinformation operations in social networks that generate massive content in favor of certain narratives, using accounts with inauthentic behavior, with the intention of manipulating public opinion in a space where, many times, the veracity of an information is associated to the reach in the network or different networks, and not by the work history of the media that publishes it, the veracity of the source or the value of the methodologies used for the origin of the research. The biggest problem with these is, as has been said, that “disinformation does not seek to make you believe in just one thing, but to make you believe in none”.
- “Legal” frameworks to control online opinions, creating new laws or adapting previous versions to give criminal character under criteria such as “treason” or “terrorism” to opinions issued through social networks. “I am neither violating your freedom of expression and access to information, but your expression is a danger to the nation.”

Propaganda is the only “official information”: having censored the media, coerced institutions, imprisoned political dissidence, suffocated academia and persecuted organized civil society, is the way to guarantee that your version of the facts is the only one accessible, that it lasts and is maintained. In this way they manage to impose themselves in the battle for the construction of public discourse. “I am not saying it, it is what people are talking about and asking for”.

It is no casualty or coincidence the investment in economic and technological resources, strategies and the amount of efforts by authoritarian governments to control and dominate the conversation that is generated in social networks; through the manipulation and contamination of the conversation in social networks not only they try to hide the reality denounced by the citizens in the only space still moderately available for it, but it is also used to reinforce and impose altered versions of international events (such as the “denazification” of Russia to Ukraine as the official version, for example), pretending to hide the uncomfortable reality for the allies in the Kremlin.

In democracy, disinformation, fake news and hate speeches aim to undermine the values, institutions and representatives that maintain it; but in countries with authoritarian contexts, they are used to manipulate, control and intimidate the population.

A possible solution, against these false realities created inauthentically in social networks, is through the education of citizens, providing tools to those who are the main victims of the consequences of disinformation, creating awareness and motivating people to engage responsibly in debates and conversations on social networks.

On the other hand, it is necessary the attention of political decision makers and those in favor of the defense of human rights to address this as a global problem, to join more and more efforts in favor of the struggle for free access to information, denouncing these operations of influence of autocratic governments, focused on building possible actions that we can take today, thinking about the world of tomorrow.

Canada 



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