The successful gamble of Russian soft power in Latin America

Description

While we hear much about Russian influence in Africa, we rarely hear about Moscow's strategy in Latin America. Yet, an apparent, clear strengthening of ties can be observed there, mainly since 2014, based on adequate Russian soft power.



Against the backdrop of Western sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russian and Latin American partners have found each other well. In a few years, economic exchanges have deepened, and Russian arms sales in the region have increased. At the same time, Moscow has implemented a soft power strategy organized around two main axes: political reflection on the world and investment in culture and education.

A political reflection on the world

Because Latin America is perceived as an important region for the United States, it is also of interest to Russia, which wishes to strengthen its presence there to deploy its geopolitical narrative: its investment in terms of thinking about foreign policy and the state of the world is aimed at reducing the influence of the West, and more particularly the United States.

Moscow's discourse on the end of Western hegemony and the rise of a multipolar world is finding an echo in Latin America. This is mainly, but not only the case, in countries traditionally linked to Russia, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. This connection is reflected in the speeches of Latin American leaders. Former Chilean President Sebastian Piñera (2010-2014 and 2018-2022) said that *"we need leadership and multilateral collaboration"*(1), while Argentine President Alberto Fernández notes that countries are now *"united by multilateralism or dominated by polarization"*(2). Fernández is generally very critical of Washington's attitude towards Latin American countries: he believes that the Organisation of American States (OAS) was used as a policeman to facilitate a coup d'état in Bolivia in 2019(3) and that the United States appropriated the leadership of the Inter-American Development Bank, which Latin America has historically owned. As a result, there is growing distrust in the region of the United States, which is accused of unilaterally imposing itself on decisions affecting Latin America and the world.

In a new development, states whose leaders have traditionally pursued a pro-Washington foreign policy are changing sides. This is the case in Colombia, where for decades, power has remained in the hands of pro-US leaders such as Alvaro Uribe or those close to him (including Ivan Duque); however, the last elections in June 2022 brought to power Gustavo Petro, who is much more critical of Washington. This development is not without its worries for the US government: it was first seen under the presidency of Donald Trump, who spoke of re-establishing the Monroe Doctrine and defined his opponents in Latin America as a *"troika of tyranny"* (*id est* Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela), using Cold War vocabulary. Joe Biden's presidency is no less concerned about these shifts, as evidenced, for example, by the comments of political elites reported by the media and by the press itself during the election of Gustavo Petro.

Finally, several Latin American states are in some way indebted to Russia for selling them its Sputnik V vaccine during the Covid pandemic. For example, Argentina, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Venezuela began administering the vaccine to their populations long before the West could offer support. As a result, Moscow emerged as a reliable partner. For example, the Argentinean President has repeatedly thanked Russia for selling his vaccine, showing this accountability.

Investment in culture and education

Russia's investment through its soft power helps to encourage the permeation of its ideas in Latin American societies.

This is done first of all through media influence. The Spanish version of *Russia Today* was launched in 2009 and is overgrowing. It now has an audience close to that of the American media in the region, which has historically had a strong position there. In 2018, RT's audience in Latin America reached 17 million viewers, three times more than in 2015. In addition, some local programs promote values and visions compatible with those of Russia: this is the case, for example, of the program "Conversando con Correa," hosted by former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, during which the former head of state receives prominent political figures in Latin America: former Argentine president and current vice president Cristina Kirchner, current Argentine president Alberto Fernández, but also Gustavo Petro, three years before his election as head of Colombia.

This Russian soft power also involves culture and promoting the Russian language in Latin America. The Ruskiy Mir Foundation, created in 2007 by presidential decree to promote the Russian language throughout the world, has ten centers in the region (two in Argentina, one in Brazil, one in Peru, one in Ecuador, one in Costa Rica, one in Guatemala, one in Nicaragua, one in Cuba and one in Mexico). Rossotroudnitchestvo, a federal agency for the Russian diaspora abroad and international cultural and humanities cooperation established in 2008, has three centers (in Argentina, Peru, and Chile) and has established representations in the Russian embassies in Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua. In addition, the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language has opened branches in Ecuador, Peru, and Cuba. As a result, the number of Latin Americans learning Russian is steadily increasing, although it is still modest (an estimated 30,000). The Institute also organizes exchanges at regional festivals, such as the Feria Internacional del Libro in Havana and the Feria Internacional del Libro in Mexico City.

Education is another strategic element, as education is costly in many Latin American countries. Therefore, more and more scholarships are being granted to Latin American students, whose presence in Russia is growing. While 1 600 Latin Americans were studying in Russia in 2011, their number rose to 4 400 in 2017. The majority of these students come from Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia. In 2017, the increase in the number of Latin American students in Russia was 28%, which is the highest rate among all international students in Russia. These scholarships are a real opportunity for these students, offering them better jobs in Russian companies, some in Russia or their home countries.

Furthermore, in 2019, Russia affirmed its commitment to expanding its cultural presence in the region, allocating 6 million rubles (approximately €86,000) to a project to promote the Russian education system in Latin America, specifically in four countries: Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Bolivia. This strategy of investment in education is also based on the promotion of the Russian education system: an exhibition called "Estudiar en Rusia" was organized in 2015 in various Mexican states, followed in 2018 by a second exhibition entitled « La educacion y la ciencia en Rusia," this time in partnership with twelve Russian universities. The strategy seems to have paid off, as the number of Mexican students in Russia has increased by 83% in just three years.

What reaction(s) to the war in Ukraine?

In the context of the war launched by Russia against Ukraine, this soft power strategy can influence the positioning of Latin American countries. For example, in 2014, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela refused to vote for a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the annexation of Crimea; Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, El Salvador, and Uruguay abstained. In Argentina, some drew a parallel with the situation in the Falklands.

In February 2022, a few days before Russia launched its "military operation" against Ukraine, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro visited Russia, shortly followed by the Argentinean President who said that his country should be Russia's *"gateway"* to Latin America. Since then, Latin American leaders (Argentina and Mexico) have expressed concern about the war and called on Moscow and Kyiv to negotiate. The Latin American countries have moreover mostly supported the United Nations resolutions condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine in March (except for Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador, which abstained, and Venezuela, which could not vote) and in October 2022 (except Nicaragua which

voted against, an abstention from Cuba, Bolivia, Honduras, and the non-possibility of voting for Venezuela). But there is no mention of sanctions against Russia. The newly elected Brazilian president Lula, for his part, stated in May 2022 that Volodymyr Zelensky was *"as responsible"* for the war as Vladimir Putin, criticizing the former's *"bizarre"*(4) attitude, while recalling that Russia should not have invaded Ukraine. Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have also publicly denounced NATO's attitude, arguing that its eastward expansion has led to the current situation. While other states in the region do not show support for Moscow, their relative neutrality does not prevent them from continuing to cooperate with Russia. A telling sign is that Latin American students in Russia have remained there.

Notes:

(1) Speech by Chilean President Sebastian Piñera at the United Nations General Assembly, 22 September 2022.

(2) Speech by Argentine President Alberto Fernández on 9 June 2022, at the closing ceremony of the Summit of the Americas (formal meeting of the heads of state of North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean). See Florencia Golender, "Unidos por el multilateralismo o dominados por la polarizacion, el contundente discurso de Alberto Fernandez " (United by multilateralism or dominated by polarisation, the strong speech of Alberto Fernandez), Crónica, 10 June 2022

(3) *Op. Cit.* Note 2.

(4) *"It seems like he's part of the spectacle. He is on television morning, noon, and night. [...] We should be having a serious conversation: "OK, you were a nice comedian. But let us not make war for you to show up on TV." And we should say to Putin: "You have a lot of weapons, but you don't need to use them on Ukraine. Let's talk!",* interview "*Lula talks to TIME about Ukraine, Bolsonaro, and Brazil's Fragile Democracy*," Time, 4 May 2022.

Thumbnail: Argentine President Alberto Fernández and Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting in the Kremlin on 3 February 2022 (source: Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade, and Worship).

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