

Why Latin America is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation
By India Turner

Interest groups and legislators alike have become increasingly concerned with the lack of Russian disinformation regulation in the Spanish-language. This became clear in April when [twenty-one U.S. legislators](#) claimed that Meta was not adequately monitoring Russian disinformation about the Russo-Ukrainian War in Spanish.

Russian disinformation has run rampant amongst Spanish-language TV, social media, websites, and message boards since the war began. RT en Español has been the [most successful](#) during the war compared to other versions of RT: Arabic, English, French, and German. RT en Español became the [“third most shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia’s invasion.”](#) It has nearly triple the number of Facebook followers as its English counterpart. RT en Español is the primary source of information about the war, replacing more reliable sources like BBC. Despite [warnings](#) on Meta that flag Russian-owned media in the English-language, RT en Español’s likes and comments [surged](#) on the Facebook platform.

Unlike the European Union and the United States, Latin American leaders did not ban RT and Sputnik media outlets. This is partially due to communist ideological ties with several Latin American countries: Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, which have [expressed pro-Russian sentiment](#). The lack of state regulation has enabled Russian disinformation in the Spanish language to flourish and become mainstream.

Russia’s disinformation campaign is wide reaching, affecting most of Latin America. Russian state-affiliated media is also targeting Spanish speaking U.S. citizens, who have become a prime target for Russian disinformation. While the majority of RT en Español’s [website traffic](#) comes from Venezuela (21.29%), Argentina (16.93%), Mexico (13.33%), and Colombia (5.52%), the United States claimed 5.37% of website traffic in the past month.

Russia is Targeting Spanish-speakers to Become Anti-Ukraine and Divert Attention From the War

Russia knows Latin America is particularly vulnerable to their disinformation campaigns. **Not only does Russia have ideological ties in Latin America, but the region also has a long history of contention with the United States.** This primes these individuals to believe anti-U.S. disinformation.

1) Muddy Support for Ukraine

Researchers believe that Russian state-affiliated media is targeting Spanish audiences to [“muddy support among Hispanics in the Western Hemisphere for Ukraine.”](#) The Russian government hopes

to create opposition against the United States' response efforts to support Ukraine. If the disinformation campaign is successful, the international community's response to Russia's invasion may be disjointed. One researcher suggests that Russia's behavior [“illustrates a repeated pattern of leveraging Latin America to deliberately pose strategic threats to the United States, thus creating space for its aggressive actions in Europe.”](#)

2) Divert Attention towards US and NATO's tumultuous history with Latin America

Russian officials chose to alter the narrative and paint the United States and NATO as a more imminent threat to Latin American audiences. The United States' pervasive military interventions and forced regime changes in Latin America have bred discontent amongst many. That discontent can easily be exploited. Headlines such as [“Never forget who is the real threat to the world”](#) are broadcasted on RT en Español. These articles seek to draw attention from the war towards the wrongdoings of the United States. RT en Español also frames the war as NATO's fault.

Pre-existing Tensions With the United States Aid Russian Disinformation

Russian disinformation in Spanish has been highly effective in Latin America because of [existing tensions between this region and the United States](#), [support by regional officials](#), and limited monitoring capabilities. The coalescence of these factors has enabled Russian disinformation to boom in the Spanish language.

Social media companies struggle to monitor disinformation in Spanish, causing less content to be flagged or banned. Many Spanish phrases vary depending on the country of origin, which makes widespread monitoring difficult for companies. RT en Español's social media accounts also post video clips from their news channels, further [complicating](#) disinformation regulation since sound is difficult to monitor. This combined with limited resources allows Russian disinformation to be highly effective in this language.

Pre-existing tensions between Latin America and the United States exacerbate this problem. Russia's focus on the Spanish language is not a new phenomenon. Latin America was also a [prime target](#) for Russia during the Cold War. During the Cold War and now, Russia [“sought to exploit historic tensions between the U.S. and Latin America”](#) by [supporting communist allies](#). Russian media can then imply that the United States (and its media) should not be trusted. Some evidence suggests that many Latin American voters now believe NATO is as [“responsible for the war as Russia.”](#)

Disinformation has also thrived because some [regional leaders](#) do not want to monitor Russian disinformation. While the European Union and United States have taken steps to limit Russian disinformation, many Latin American leaders have not, either for [economic](#) or [ideological](#) reasons.

Many Latin American countries want to preserve their trade agreements with the West and Russia, and banning Russian news sites may alienate those ties. Other leaders, especially those of communist countries, may refuse to limit Russian disinformation because of their ideological similarities. The lack of governmental monitoring of disinformation has been a leading factor in the pervasive disinformation in Latin America.

Combatting the Effects of RT en Español

It would be beneficial for nonprofit organizations to cultivate reliable Spanish-language news sources Spanish speakers trust and feel connected to. **Until then, alternative news sources, such as [BBC Mundo](#) and [El País](#) are both reliable sources for Spanish-speakers to consult.**

Additionally, social media companies, especially Meta, **should hire disinformation monitoring teams composed of native Spanish speakers from each Latin American country to manually code for Russian state-affiliated propaganda.** Currently, [third party non-profit organizations](#) are mostly responsible for flagging Spanish-language disinformation. Agence France-Presse, a private international news agency, is [responsible](#) for most of the monitoring in Latin America. However, that monitoring is sporadic within most countries and nonexistent in others like Cuba. **More non-profit organizations and monitoring teams are necessary in order to properly monitor Russian disinformation.**

Social media companies should also **consider removing certain Russian state-affiliated accounts, such as Sputnik and RT en Español, from the platform.** While RT English and Sputnik have been banned on Facebook by the European Union, Meta has not taken steps to limit accounts on its own accord. While Latin American politicians may be unwilling or unable to ban these sites, Meta should ban or flag these accounts.